A NANCY WHEELER MYSTERY

NETFLIX

STRANGER THINGS

ONE WAY OR ANOTHER

CAITLIN SCHNEIDERHAN

BY CAITLIN SCHNEIDERHAN

Stranger Things: Flight of Icarus

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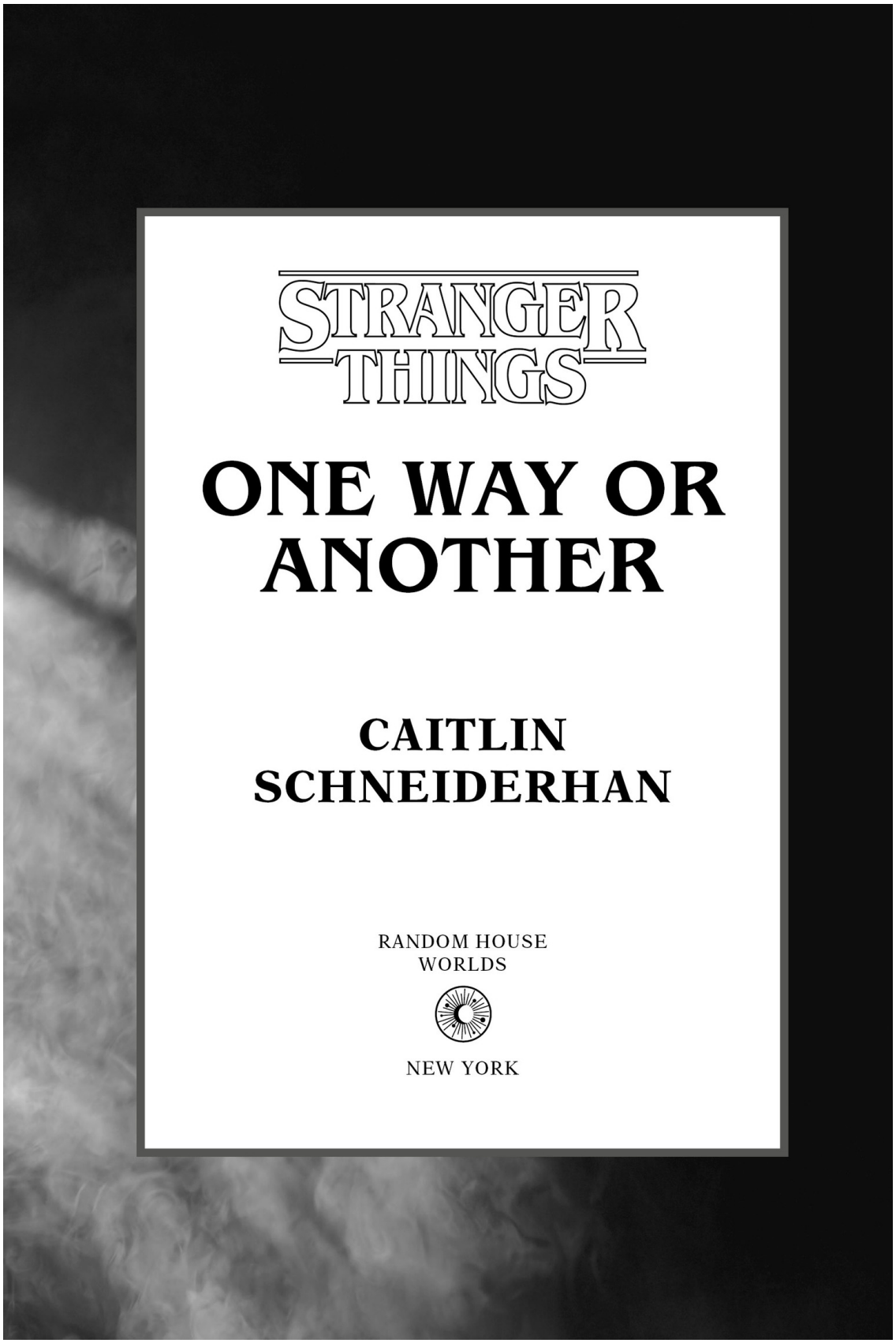

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RANDOM HOUSE
WORLDS

NEW YORK

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Random House Worlds
An imprint of Random House
A division of Penguin Random House LLC
1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019
randomhousebooks.com
penguinrandomhouse.com

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Hardback ISBN 9780593973837
International edition ISBN 9798217094462
Ebook ISBN 9780593973844

BOOK TEAM: Production editor: Abby Duval • Managing editor: Susan Seeman • Production manager: Jane Sankner • Copy editor: J. J. Evans • Proofreaders: Drew Goter, Alissa Fitzgerald, Taylor McGowan, Darcie Robertson

Book design by Elizabeth A. D. Eno, adapted for ebook by Vincent Mancuso
Title page stock art by kinomaster/Adobe Stock

Cover art: Robert Hunt
Cover design: Scott Biel

The authorized representative in the EU for product safety and compliance is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68, Ireland. https://eu-contact.penguin.ie

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To the kids who ask for forgiveness
instead of begging for permission

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Chapter One

On the bright side, dying in a funeral home meant that cleanup and transportation would be easy, at least.

Nancy Wheeler refused to voice this thought as she stood in the wreckage of what once had been the Farrier Family Funeral Home lobby, the beam of her flashlight taking in the toppled velvet furniture, the thick layer of dust, and the rubble of the collapsed far wall.

Robin did not share Nancy's restraint. "If we die in here—"

"Convenient," Steve chipped in.

"Small blessings," Robin added. The pair of them moved past Nancy, pacing out onto the ruined green carpet.

"They're a couple of rays of sunshine," Jonathan muttered. He was scanning their surroundings with an appropriate level of wariness, considering the fact that the four of them had disregarded at least five CONDEMNED DANGER, CAUTION DANGER, or DO NOT ENTER DANGER signs on their way into the building.

"Come on," Nancy said. "This way."

Together, they picked their way toward the heavy oak door that hung off its top hinges just past the lobby. A bronze plaque gleamed anemically under a thick layer of grime, but Nancy didn't need to wipe it clean to know that it marked the room beyond as the funeral home's main office; the sturdy desk opposite the twin cushioned chairs made that obvious.

Jonathan padded to a stop behind her, walking carefully so his footsteps wouldn't echo off the somber, bare walls. "Flashlights?" he whispered.

"Flashlights," she agreed. Together, they flicked off their flashlights—

And waited.

Waited. Nancy had been doing a lot of *waiting* in the two months since Vecna's "earthquake" had torn through Hawkins. Countless buildings like this one, which stood within spitting distance of the spiderwebbing Rift, had been partially or completely destroyed in the disaster. Countless lives had been destroyed as well.

The days that had followed had shaken the town even further. A quarter of Hawkins's population had cut its losses and fled, even as the U.S. Army had rolled in to take their place, establishing an impassable perimeter under the guise of "quarantine." Crossing that perimeter was nearly impossible, achievable only for the select few—supply deliveries, case-by-case approvals, and, very recently, humanitarian aid.

And if the town's borders were rigorously protected, then the blockade around downtown Hawkins was practically draconian. What had once been the town's bustling hub was now a military no-fly zone. Within moments of their arrival in Hawkins, the military had zeroed in on the epicenter of Vecna's destruction, the spot where his four Rifts had intersected. A radius of a few blocks had been drawn from that point, sketching out the circumference of what would become the military's own personal black hole. Whatever happened within that perimeter was a mystery to everyone in Hawkins, including Nancy.

All that security. All that destruction. And despite everything—there hadn't been so much as a *whisper* of Vecna since Nancy had shot him in the disgusting, decaying head.

He can't hide forever, she told herself. *We'll find him.* I'll *find him.*

It sounded good, as affirmations went. Nancy had given it a workout, put it through its paces. But affirmations were just words if you didn't put in the work to back them up.

Which was why she, Jonathan, Steve, and Robin had broken into this half-collapsed funeral home in a disaster zone at ten P.M. And it was why she was now blinking into the darkness, watching her unlit flashlight for the tiniest flicker of a glow.

Was this the first time she'd found herself in a situation like this? No. Was it the first time she'd found herself in a situation like this *this*

month?…No. But if she was going to find Vecna—*and she was*—then she wasn't going to be able to do it by sitting around and waiting for him to walk through her front door. If there was a tip, a hunch, a *whisper*—she was going to hunt it down.

She just wished that her friends shared her conviction.

"Nancy…" Jonathan's disembodied voice whispered out of the dark from somewhere on the other side of the room.

"Shh." *He can't hide forever.*

"Nancy. He's not here."

Nancy resolutely studied her flashlight. There was a kernel of something empty growing in the pit of her stomach. She willed it down. *We'll find him.*

"Nancy—"

I'll *find him.*

"Hey, guys."

Nancy could *feel* the beam of Robin's flashlight as it sliced through the dusty air, practically piercing her corneas. She flinched backward, shielding her vision. "Ah—Robin—"

"Look what I found. Oh shit. Sorry, Nance." She lowered her flashlight, far enough that it wasn't stripping out every rod and cone in Nancy's eyes but not so far that Nancy couldn't make out the bouquet of white roses in Robin's other hand. "The storage room is full of 'em." Robin gave the bouquet a shake. Dust fell from the leaves and petals in a shower. "They're all fake. Did we know the Farriers were using fake flowers?"

"Could be a scandal," Steve commented from somewhere in the dark behind Robin.

"I think this town's got bigger fish than a couple of plastic flowers," Jonathan said.

Nancy waved her hand through the plume of dust, trying not to inhale. "Did you guys find anything real out there?"

"Nada. Zilch," Steve said. "Reception room's clear. Visitation room's clear."

"*Visitation* room." Robin snapped her fingers. "Couldn't remember what that was called."

“There’s still a coffin in there,” Steve said. He was tossing his flashlight from hand to hand, but because he, at least, hadn’t turned the beam back on, they weren’t being treated to a blinding laser show. “It’s up at the front.”

“Casket.” *Shut up, Nancy. It doesn’t matter.* “Did you check inside?”

It was hard to tell in the dark, but Nancy was pretty sure that Steve blanched. “Do I *need* to?”

Robin smashed her bouquet into Steve’s chest, leaving behind a smear of grime. “She’s messing with you, dingus.” Then she turned back to Nancy. “You *are*, right?…Nancy?”

It was tempting to say no, to send Steve back into the *visitation* room—to tell the truth, Nancy hadn’t remembered the name for it either—and make him open the casket, if only so they could say that they’d truly left no stone unturned.

“I’m messing with you,” Nancy said.

“See?” Robin went to smack Steve with her flowers again, but Nancy was there, pushing between them and back out into the lobby, her flashlight still dead in her hand. She *felt* rather than *saw* Steve’s gaze on her, following her as she left. It itched at the back of her neck and raised echoes in her ears.

“You’re there.”

“You’ve always been there.”

They hadn’t talked about it since that day. There had been the attack on Vecna and then—Eddie had happened, and then *Max*, and then the world had ended. And then Jonathan had come back. And unsurprisingly, in the midst of all that chaos, neither of them had been eager to address Steve’s bumbling and oblique confession of—whatever it was.

Now it was two months later, and those words were still hanging over both of them like an anvil. Maybe if Nancy didn’t look up at them, then she wouldn’t have to think about…how they made her feel.

As far as game plans went, Nancy thought she could do worse. And anyway, there were bigger things to focus on. Things that had drawn them to this condemned building in the middle of the night.

The moon overhead was almost full, and the moonlight that filtered through the cracks in the shattered wall was bright enough to read by. Nancy dug the sheet of pilfered memo paper out of her pocket and squinted down at the scribbled words, skipping over the HAWKINS POST logo emblazoned across the top.

Jeanine Farrier reports flickering lights, it said in Margaret Benik's crabbed handwriting. *Disembodied voices. Farrier Funeral Home*.

This is it, Nancy told herself, trying to channel the excited certainty she'd felt that morning when she'd swiped the memo off of Margaret's reception desk. She'd spent the last few weeks vigilant but directionless—they all had. Hopper and Eleven had retreated to Hopper's secluded cabin, both to start the work of making the building livable again and to avoid the notice of their new military overlords. Joyce had been occupied with finding her family a place to stay, now that they had returned to Hawkins. Mike, Dustin, Will, and Lucas had supposedly been working to figure out a way for El to get around unnoticed, but with Max lying comatose in the hospital, they hadn't made a lot of headway through their lingering cloud of grief and shock.

They were still reeling in the aftermath of Vecna's victory. All of them were, Nancy included. The earthquake—the rupture of the world—had scattered them all to the winds, and now they were in distant orbit, trying to find their ways back to one another. A little difficult when they didn't have a place where they could even start to regroup.

Fine. They didn't need one. After all of Nancy's weeks of vigilance, monitoring every tip that came through *The Hawkins Post*, every deluded crackpot calling in to the local radio station—her work had paid off. She smoothed Margaret Benik's note out in the palm of her hand. *Flickering lights. Disembodied voices*.

Vecna. It had to be. He must be lurking in Farrier Funeral Home in the Upside Down, sinking his poisoned psychic fangs into whoever wandered nearest. And they had found him.

He can't hide forever.

“He’s here,” Nancy said. The other three had gathered in the lobby, watching Nancy with expressions that ranged from light enthusiasm to gentle pity. “Somewhere. We just have to keep looking.”

“Nance…”

Steve had probably been aiming for a soothing tone. All he succeeded at was pissing Nancy off.

“The longer we stand around staring at each other, the longer this is going to take,” she said tartly, flicking her flashlight back on. Then she was off, stalking into the ruined recesses of the funeral home, with Jonathan trotting at her heels.

“Nancy. Hey, listen,” Jonathan said as they moved past the open door to the reception room. “You know I’m all for you telling Steve to piss off—”

“That’s not what I said.”

Jonathan smiled. “It’s what I heard. And I loved it. But he’s right. These rooms are clear. Vecna’s not here.”

Nancy waggled Margaret’s scribbled memo. “Flickering lights. Disembodied voices.”

“This building is, like, half destroyed,” Jonathan said. “Who knows what’s going on with the wiring? And these walls were thin even *before* they were rubble. If Mrs. Farrier heard voices in here, were they ‘disembodied’? Or were they just, you know, *outside*?”

Nancy had a vise grip on the handle of her flashlight. “We’re going to find him, Jonathan.”

“I’m not arguing with you on that,” Jonathan said. “We *will*. We just might not find him *tonight*. Okay?”

Her jaw ached. She realized she was grinding her teeth, biting back the word *no* with every fiber of her being. But before it could slip past her failing self-restraint—

“Um, guys?”

Nancy and Jonathan turned to find Robin standing near the front door, her face grim. She jerked her head back in the direction of the offices. “You’re gonna want to see this.”

This was a large door marked STAFF ONLY. It had been discreetly tucked away to begin with, but when two of the funeral home's somber decorative columns had toppled over across it, the door had become so invisible they hadn't noticed it at first.

"I spotted it when I was doing another pass of the area," Robin said.

"She tripped over one of the columns," Steve said. "That's how she found it."

"Okay, it doesn't *matter* how I found it," Robin said, and now Nancy could see the Robin-shaped mark in the dust on the nearest column. "The important thing is—*look*."

She pointed. Nancy followed the direction she indicated, scanning the silhouette of the columns and the outline of the door in the murky gloom. For a long moment, she couldn't see anything out of the ordinary—certainly nothing that would inspire the pallid expression on Robin's face.

Then, in the cracks around the door—*light flickered*.

Nancy's heart jumped into her throat. At her side, she could hear Jonathan stop breathing for a split second. Somewhere in the dark, Steve swore under his breath.

"See?" Robin whispered.

"Help me move these things," Nancy whispered back.

The four of them managed to shift the columns aside to clear a path to the door. Above them, the remnants of the roof shifted and groaned, raining dust onto their heads. Nancy tried not to think about what they might be doing to the building's structural integrity as she straightened up, wiping her hands on her jeans.

The door swung outward as Robin yanked on the handles.

Steve winced at the shriek of the warped hinges. "Jesus," he muttered, before bringing his flashlight to bear.

It wasn't another room that the beam of light illuminated, or even a staircase. Instead, a sloping ramp stretched into the depths of the funeral home, disappearing into darkness—a darkness shattered sporadically by the distant flickering of an unseen light.

The unmistakable stench of formaldehyde wafted up toward them, making their eyes water.

“If Vecna’s really down there,” Robin whispered, “then I guess we have to give him points for consistency, at least? He’s a creepy guy, and he’s hiding out in a *mortuary*?”

“The Farriers cleared out all their…*customers* after the earthquake, right?” Steve asked. Despite the reluctance in his voice, he was already setting off down the ramp, sneakers squeaking on the tile underfoot.

Not to be outdone, Jonathan went next, a pace or two behind Steve. “No, Steve,” he drawled sarcastically. “I bet you this place is standing room only.”

“It was just a question. You don’t have to be an asshole,” Steve snipped.

Robin rolled her eyes at Nancy. “Spare us from the fragility of the male ego.”

“I wish,” Nancy responded. She and Robin followed the boys down the ramp, shoulder to shoulder as they walked. “This was a good find, by the way.”

“Well, I figured if these two were gonna be wasting their time whining about being up past their bedtimes, then *somebody* had to do some actual work.” Robin’s voice was barely above a whisper, but the words still resonated off the bare walls, the echoes disappearing into the cavernous dark ahead of them. “And listen, I know I made that crack about funeral homes earlier, but I’m going to be honest with you. It will *not* be convenient if any of us die here tonight. My mom’ll kill me. And then we’ll miss graduation, and my mom’ll kill me again.”

Nancy smiled. “Heaven forbid.”

They were approaching the end of the ramp. Robin’s steps slowed, dawdling. Nancy wasn’t sure she was aware she was doing it.

“So just to be clear”—Robin fought through a slight stammer—“this is, like, a fact-finding mission, right? Locate Vecna, but do not engage?”

Nancy tried to project as much sunny confidence as she could. “How would we engage? He’s in another dimension.”

“You’d figure out a way.”

Her faith—and her slight edge of fear—were bracing. “We’re just checking this place out. Whatever we find, we take straight to Hopper and Eleven. Promise.”

“Cool. Cool.” The girls reached the end of the ramp. “Sometimes you just have to be sure.”

They turned out onto the mortuary floor to find Steve and Jonathan studiously investigating the opposite sides of the room. Jonathan was running the beam of his flashlight over the fluorescent bulbs set into the ceiling, while Steve poked absently at a tray of metal instruments that Nancy was pretty sure were used for embalming. She generously did not inform Steve of this.

“Same plan,” she whispered. “Lights out. We each take a different area. Jonathan and Robin, you stay out here. Steve, you take that room over there.” She gestured toward a far doorway, through which she could see an array of mirrors, cosmetics, hairbrushes—everything a person would need to make a corpse presentable. “I’ll take the…refrigerators.”

Jonathan peered at the bank of aluminum drawers that Nancy had just indicated. “Are you sure?”

“If you see anything out of the ordinary,” Nancy went on, powering through Jonathan’s doubts, “or *hear* anything out of the ordinary, *speak up*. And if any of us stops responding to the others—”

“SOS,” Robin filled in. “Then—”

Picking up her cue, each of them produced a Walkman. Nancy tagged on each of them with her flashlight. *Check. Check. Check.*

“Good,” she said.

“Let’s get this bastard,” Steve said.

Nancy gave a definite nod.

Again, their lights went out.

At least upstairs, they’d had the moonlight to navigate by. Here, in the bowels of the funeral home, it was pitch black. Nancy’s very first step sent her hip ramming into an unseen countertop hard enough to bruise. Forcing herself to breathe through the sudden throb of pain, she limped *carefully* forward, moving by feel.

Of course—*of course*—the flickering lights that had drawn them down here in the first place were nowhere to be seen, and in the dark, Nancy could hear every tiny, scuffled sound like it was being shouted right into her ear. She successfully maneuvered her way into the refrigeration room, leaving behind the muffled cacophony of her friends' distant breathing and the shuffle of their feet on the ceramic floor.

It wasn't a big space—she knew that from the brief glimpse she'd gotten before they'd shut off their flashlights. And it felt somehow even smaller in the dark as silence pressed in on all sides—silence that carved out plenty of room for Jonathan's words to come floating back to her.

"…not find him tonight."

He hadn't been saying that their cause was hopeless. He hadn't been calling her an idiot for dragging them all to this condemned funeral home. He had just said…it might not happen *tonight*.

It shouldn't be getting under her skin. It should *definitely* not be sending panic bubbling up in her stomach. But it was. And unfortunately, she knew exactly why.

Three days ago, she'd received something in the mail—a registration packet for Emerson College. When Nancy had first flipped through the pages, she'd found information on the school's dormitories, cafeterias, layout, class schedules…

It was her future. The future she'd been dreaming of for years. All Nancy had to do to claim it was fill out the packet and return it by mail by the deadline—the end of June. After that, she'd be on her way out of Hawkins—

Unless they couldn't find Vecna.

This was the thought that kept her up at night. Because there was no way that Nancy would be able to leave Hawkins if Vecna was still at large. She wouldn't be able to live with herself if she did. If they couldn't track him down, then Nancy wouldn't be able to leave for college. And if she didn't leave for college, then she'd be stuck in this town until the day she died—or worse, until her mother's life became hers and she woke up one morning trapped behind a white picket fence.

Maybe she was spinning out a little. Anyway—Nancy forced herself to take a deep breath—it wasn't like any of that was actually going to happen. *He can't hide forever*, she repeated to herself. *We'll find him.* I'll *find—*

The overhead light flickered.

Every ounce of blood in Nancy's body turned to ice.

"Hey," she whispered. "Hey. Guys."

No one answered, and she wasn't about to tear her gaze away from the spasming fluorescent lightbulb to see whether they'd heard her. "He's in here," she hissed again. Then, holding out her darkened flashlight like an unlit torch, Nancy stepped toward the flickering light—

Just as it went dark.

"*Shit*," she muttered into the blackness. "Where the hell did you go?"

There was a fumble of movement from the embalming room behind her—a low exchange of voices as Jonathan and Robin muttered about something. Nancy was just turning back to check on them when—

There.

Another flickering light. This one was a few paces closer to the bank of refrigerated drawers. "Guys!" she called again, louder this time.

"Nance?" Robin answered. "You might wanna—"

"I found him!" Nancy said, pacing closer to the light. "He's in here!"

"He's—What?" Another low exchange followed as Jonathan and Robin talked something over. There was another sound coming from their direction as well—the rhythmic creaking of something that sounded like… metal?

Again, the flickering light cut out. But Nancy was on the trail now. She froze, staring into the dark—*waiting*.

That creaking sound hadn't let up—actually, the noises were getting louder, more drawn out. But they didn't drown out the sound of shuffling footsteps heralding Robin's approach. "Did you say he's in here?"

Nancy didn't move. "Watch the lights."

"The lights? Oh—"

"*Look*." Sure enough, another light had begun to flicker. "It's him. We got him." Nancy surged forward, tripping toward the light as it blinked,

holding out her flashlight to capture the confirmation she knew was coming —

"Wait, Nancy," Robin stammered. In the embalming room behind Robin, the strange metal creaking reached a fever pitch as something strained…and came loose, clattering to the tiled floor.

But Nancy barely noticed the din. Because she had reached the anemic fluorescent bulb, standing underneath it—*right where Vecna was standing in the Upside Down*.

Except that her flashlight remained stubbornly dark. Dull. *Dead*.

"What—" Nancy muttered.

"Jonathan, hang on a sec—" Robin called back into the embalming room.

Jonathan's response echoed off the bare walls. "What did you say?"

"I said—"

Nancy tilted her gaze up toward the overhead light. It was still sputtering, still throwing bursts of brilliance across the barren room. She squinted into its depths.

"I think I got it!" Jonathan called.

"No, wait—" Robin said, but something mechanical was already clicking into place under Jonathan's fingers. "Nancy!"

And that was all the warning Nancy got before her world was swallowed by a supernova.

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Chapter Two

"Ladies and gentlemen of the class of 1986, friends and family, teachers and administrators, *welcome*."

Principal Higgins stood behind the lectern on the small stage with both arms upraised, beaming like he was paid to do it. Maybe he was. It was probably the first time that Nancy had seen him smile since his "Welcome Freshmen" address four long years ago.

She shifted in her uncomfortable folding chair, resisting the urge to fidget with her bangs. The lingering smell of singed hair had probably been masked by a copious spritzing of her mother's Anne Klein, but she couldn't be absolutely sure. At least she was confident that the hour she'd spent carefully finessing her makeup in the mirror this morning had done a good job at disguising the tiny burns sprinkled across the right side of her face.

"You look like shit, Wheeler."

Though maybe her confidence was misplaced.

Nancy slid a sideways glare up to Seth Travers, her alphabetically assigned neighbor. A member of Hawkins High's preeminently mediocre wrestling team, Seth was more of a one-person blockade than a seatmate. His oversized head could blot out the sun, and with the help of his mortarboard cap, it actually did.

"Shh," she hissed at him, returning her gaze to the stage.

"Let me be the first to congratulate you on this incredible achievement," Principal Higgins was saying. "Graduation is no small feat—especially when the environment that you are graduating into is as chaotic and uncertain as this one."

Seth didn’t seem at all interested in Higgins’s platitudes. “What happened to you?”

I dragged my friends into the basement of a condemned funeral home because some flickering lights told me there might be an interdimensional villain lurking around, Nancy didn’t say. *Then my boyfriend hit a messed-up circuit breaker and exploded some rusty wiring. Right in my face.*

“Nothing,” Nancy gritted out.

But if four years of getting choked out by other muscle-bound jocks hadn’t fazed Seth, then Nancy’s icy tone wasn’t about to. “Messed with some firecrackers?” He nodded sagely. “Been there.”

“Yeah. Sure, Seth.” Nancy rolled her shoulders under her graduation robe. “Firecrackers. Why not?”

Between the stinging of her eyebrows and the bone-deep mortification of last night, there had been a moment earlier that morning when Nancy had actually considered trying to beg off graduation. The thought of sitting through an hour of Higgins’s monotonous droning—not to mention a metric ton of Jonathan’s sad-puppy-dog *I’m so sorry for burning your face off* looks—hadn’t done anything to sweeten the prospect.

But as she’d slid out of bed, getting her scratchy-throat story teed up and ready to deploy, she’d been greeted with the sight of her graduation robe hanging on her bedroom door. The hideous green fabric had ignited a bubbling excitement inside her, and for a second, it was almost like she could…*taste* her future.

I’m almost out of here, she’d thought as she’d washed her face, brushed her hair, and thrown on a dress. *It’s almost time. I’m almost gone.*

It had felt like a promise as she shrugged the slick polyester robe over her shoulders and screwed her mortarboard down over her hair, trying her best to hide the evidence of the previous night’s adventures. She’d made her grand entrance into the kitchen, where her mother exclaimed over her tearily, her father pulled her into a hug, and Mike whined about being forced to wear a tie to the ceremony. She’d savored the moment, committing it to memory—down to the lopsided bows in Holly’s hair and the dribble of maple syrup off her stack of pancakes. And now—

She was sitting shoulder to shoulder with her classmates under the blazing June sun in the middle of the football field, a bead of sweat trailing down her back.

It wasn't a huge turnout, all things considered—the families that had given up on Hawkins after Vecna's earthquake had taken their graduating seniors with them. Still, the class of '86 was robust enough to fill a dozen rows of folding chairs, as long as those rows weren't too long.

"But before we commence this…commencement," Principal Higgins recited, pausing smugly for the dutiful chuckle that rippled up from the families in the bleachers, "let us take a moment to remember those classmates who could not be here with us today. The classmates that were taken from us too soon."

Nancy had expected Higgins to mention something along these lines, but that didn't stop the cold wave that swept over her at the sound of—

"Barbara Holland."

The wave crested. Nancy was underwater. She was drowning in the same sea of memories that dragged her under every time she thought of Barb—of the life she'd been living before her best friend had been wiped off the face of the planet.

There was a universe out there, probably, where that hadn't happened. Where Nancy would be sitting in this awful sun-baked folding chair on graduation day on a field that was actually packed with students. Where Nancy would be finding Barb's smile from a few rows ahead so they could both roll their eyes at whatever torturous monologue Higgins was unleashing on them.

That world wasn't this one. Now Nancy could only close her eyes and listen as Higgins intoned his way through every tragedy that had beset Hawkins over the past three years.

"Heather Holloway. Samuel Rivers. Nathan Chu."

Sammy and Nate—the mall?

"Christine Cunningham. Fredrick Benson."

Fred. That poor idiot.

"Patrick McKinney. Jason Carver."

There was no mention of Eddie Munson.

In the first row of chairs, among the B's, Robin and Jonathan twisted to look back at Nancy. It was gratifying to see the same sorrow and anger on their faces that Nancy felt roiling in her chest. *You save Hawkins and what's your reward? Everyone in town curses your name or tries to forget that you ever existed.*

"Every single one of those students walks among you today," Higgins went on. "They may not be here in body, but they are here in spirit. And they are in our hearts as members of the faculty of Hawkins High, forever."

The quiet moment that followed was peppered with muffled sniffles. Nancy was surprised to find that there were tears stinging at her own eyes—not at Higgins's hollow words but at the fact that, even without Eddie, the list of names he had recited was so long.

"*Watch it!*" Seth Travers snapped under his breath.

Nancy shot him an acid glare. She hadn't *done* anything.

But it wasn't Nancy he was speaking to. Seth was glowering over at the person on his other side. She snuck a peek around him, angling for a glimpse of whoever the instigator was, and found a skinny kid slouching low in his chair—so low he was almost sliding off it.

It shouldn't have taken Nancy as long as it did to come up with the boy's name, especially given the reduced size of their graduating class. But Nancy could probably count on one hand the number of times she'd actively noticed Joey Taft's existence. Mostly he'd registered to her as a nerdy shadow, bent double under the unwieldy bulk of his trombone case as he scurried through the high school corridors. She should have expected to be sitting near him at graduation. But before this moment, she hadn't even remembered that they went to the same school, much less shared a quadrant of the ABC's.

"*If you don't cool it, I'll beat your face in*," Seth whispered to Joey, and now Nancy could see why. Joey was fidgeting incessantly. One knee jigged in place, and one hand fussed with the cuff of his sleeve. Even his gaze was restless. His eyes darted constantly, tagging on the stage, the ground, the sky, the bleachers, before returning to the stage again.

His behavior tugged at something in the depths of Nancy's memory. She squinted, trying to place it.

But before she could, Principal Higgins's voice boomed through the speakers with renewed reverberation. "We have a very special commencement speaker today," he proclaimed. "One of Hawkins High's very own, a Tiger through and through. Since graduation, she's gone on to work for many of the country's leading law firms…but what has cemented her in the hearts of people all across the country is the nonprofit that she created fifteen years ago. Ladies and gentlemen, class of '86, please join me in giving a warm welcome to Hearth & Home's founder and CEO… Georgia Miller, class of 1962!"

The introduction hit the assembly like a bomb. Nancy could see the waves it made as it rippled back from the stage. Capped and gowned seniors leaned into one another, whispering, "*She's from Hawkins? Someone famous is from Hawkins?*"

And Nancy wasn't immune to the impact, either. She craned in her seat, silently cursing the fact that her last name had landed her at the back of the crowd—and that Jeremy Porter in the row ahead of her was so damn tall. In her strained efforts to see, she'd leaned right into Seth and his delicate personal bubble. This time, though, he didn't react. His eyes were pinned on the stage just like everybody else's, watching the woman who rose from one of the faculty's array of chairs (padded, unlike the students' seats) and stepped gracefully to the microphone.

"Shit," Seth muttered appreciatively. "She's hot."

Neanderthal phrasing aside, Seth was right. Georgia Miller couldn't have been more than five-foot-three, but she commanded the attention of everyone in the audience before she even said a word. Her long black-brown hair was tied at the nape of her neck in a thick bun, and the wire-rimmed glasses perched high on her nose highlighted her eyes rather than hid them. Even her charcoal-gray pantsuit was a stunner; Nancy didn't think tailoring that impeccable was available anywhere within a fifty-mile radius of Hawkins.

But fashion wasn't the only thing that had Nancy sitting forward in her seat. Hearth & Home was *the* name in nonprofit housing relief, and while that might not have meant much to anyone in Hawkins a few months ago, in a post-Vecna world, H&H was *everywhere*. Its signs had been posted outside houses and businesses all across town. They were so common that Nancy was pretty sure she could sketch one from memory—big yellow letters sunrising the words *Hearth & Home* over the image of an average American home and an average American family. *Saving Towns. Changing Lives.*

Cheesy? Maybe. But in the weeks after the "earthquake," once the canned goods had been donated and the damages totaled, the column that had come up *seriously* in the red had been housing. People had wanted to get back into their homes—or, failing that, to get back into *a* home. And that was where H&H had come in.

As a nonprofit, Hearth & Home had made a name for itself as the salvation of disaster zones throughout the United States. They arrived, repaired what could be repaired, and built from scratch when repairs were out of the question. When Hawkins had become their newest project, they had contracted with the occupying military in order to save the town from itself. In the weeks since they'd arrived, they'd managed to do just that. Nancy could name at least half a dozen families whose homes had been salvaged by H&H. And now she learned that the person in charge of that company—the *woman* in charge of that company—was a Hawkins native?

I'm almost out of here, she told herself once again. She was very aware of how tightly her focus was pinned on Georgia Miller. It felt like there was a target in her sights that hadn't been there before. Like she suddenly had somewhere to aim.

"I didn't want to come back to Hawkins." Georgia Miller's voice was wry and low, carrying well across the football field.

"My business is tragedy. Tornadoes, tsunamis, wildfires, blizzards—with Hearth & Home, I've seen it all. I've witnessed the devastation that can be inflicted on a community by forces outside of man's control. And I knew that, if I was to come back to Hawkins, it would probably be because

the unimaginable had happened. And the thought of that happening to the town that raised me was…well, I didn't even want to contemplate it."

Once again, Nancy was treated to a flash of that alternate universe. *Barb, happy and healthy. Their town, whole and innocent.* She shifted in her seat, uncomfortable as Georgia's words landed punches into her ribs.

Up on stage, Georgia spread her hands. "And then, as you know, the unimaginable happened. When I heard about that terrible earthquake, I immediately knew two things. The first was that I would be returning to Hawkins. And the second…well, for that, I'm going to let you all in on a little secret." She shifted closer to the microphone. "When I was your age—in the prehistoric era of 1962—I was scared out of my mind. I remember sitting right where you're sitting at my own graduation and thinking, *Okay, but what happens next?* I'd spent the first eighteen years of my life on rails, and I was about to jump the track for the first time. Sure, I was headed to college, but what was waiting for me there? And after I graduated—then what?"

Up in the front row, Nancy saw Jonathan's shoulders shift, rising up toward his ears. She couldn't be sure, but she thought he cast a split-second glance back toward her. But when she squinted at him, trying to catch his eye, he stilled, pinning his attention forward again.

Georgia shook her head. "It felt like there was this road ahead of me that was full of nothing but questions. I didn't like that. And I didn't know how to deal with it."

An uncomfortable squirming writhed to life in Nancy's stomach. She exhaled a long, low breath, hoping that would smother the sensation. It didn't work.

"I'll spare you all the angst," Georgia went on, "and I'll skip straight to the ending. Because that's my secret. If you know your ending, then everything that happens along the way just becomes…stuff that happens. It's so much less important and so much less terrifying than we give it credit for. If you live like your future is certain, then it will be."

"*Live like your future is certain*." It sounded so warm when Georgia said it. So comforting. Those words did more to placate the nest of snakes inside

of Nancy than any meditative breathing ever could.

“But how does this connect to Hawkins?” Georgia asked. “How does this connect to you, the class of ’86? You’re matriculating at an extremely chaotic moment—I can’t think of a single more destabilized period in this town’s history. So here’s the second thing I thought when I heard about the earthquake: *Hawkins will get through this*.”

He can’t hide forever.

“I know this,” Georgia said. “I think you all know it too.”

I’m almost out of here.

“And so I’m asking you,” Georgia announced, her volume rising, “class of ’86—your friends, your family—to live like we already have. Because if we do, then we won’t have to hope that the future is bright. We’ll know it is, because it’s already here.”

She raised both hands. “Congratulations, Hawkins Tigers. I can’t wait to see how you change the world.”

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Chapter Three

Despite the ceremony's pared-back attendance, it took no time at all for the football field to be gripped by a lethal gridlock as the new graduates surged toward the stands and their families surged toward them. Bringing up the rear of the alphabet as she was, Nancy was caught right in the middle of these opposing tides, unable to move even an inch in any direction. It sucked, but she wasn't about to start climbing over chairs or crawling over people to get out of there faster, so she bounced on the balls of her feet and scanned the crowd for familiar faces.

Her neighbors weren't quite as Zen-like. "*Move,* freak," Seth grunted, shoving at Joey. The smaller kid hit the wall of unmoving people in the aisle in front of him and then bounced back into Seth, a human ping-pong ball.

"There's nowhere to go," Joey said. Over Seth's shoulder, Nancy could make out the shadows under his eyes.

"Just *push,*" Seth said, winding up to shove Joey again.

"Would you cool it, Seth?" Nancy demanded, grabbing Seth's arm before he could make contact. "You're going to get out of here."

Seth shook her off, gearing up to go for Joey again. But the other boy had taken the opportunity to find some tiny gap in the crowd and had slipped away, out of Seth's reach. Seth turned back to Nancy, a nasty smile on his face. "I see how it is, Wheeler," he said. "Listen, I knew you liked freaks, but this is pushing it."

"Knew she liked what?"

The current of exiting grads had finally brought Jonathan and Robin to the back row of chairs. They were standing in the aisle next to Nancy and

Seth's row. Jonathan leveled his best glower at Seth. "Knew she liked what?" he asked again.

Seth just rolled his eyes. "Whatever," he muttered, shoving past Jonathan and stepping out into the aisle, where he was swallowed by the throng.

"Is it just me, or has that guy always sucked?" Jonathan asked.

"Always," Robin said. "But hey, how about we do a little less talking about idiots and a little more *congratulations to us*!"

"Hey." Jonathan grabbed Nancy's hand, pulling her into him. She smiled, holding her mortarboard down on her head as he planted a long kiss on her. She let her eyes slide closed, letting the moment wash over her—the sun overhead, the cheers of her fellow graduates, even the occasional shove as the next person in line tried to get down the aisle.

When they broke apart, they were both grinning. "Congrats to us," Jonathan said, echoing Robin.

"Next stop, Emerson." Nancy squeezed his arm.

Something flickered briefly in his eyes, a fracture in the perfect moment. She squinted, trying to parse it out.

"Are you guys done smooching?" Robin asked. She was staring fixedly on the clouds, at the people in the stands, at anything that wasn't Jonathan and Nancy. "Not that I don't wholeheartedly support your relationship, but I don't want to intrude on your *moments,* and currently it is a little borderline impossible for me to be anywhere else—"

"Robin!"

A girl had appeared among the exodus from the other side of the aisle—short, redheaded, and, *God*, Nancy thought she was better at names than this.

"Vickie!" Robin said after one excruciatingly long moment. She was staring at the girl—Vickie, that's right. She was in band too. Was everyone in band?

"We made it!" Vickie exclaimed, joining their little huddle as they shuffled toward the bleachers inch by excruciating inch. "Can you believe it? I mean, listening to Higgins talk, it was seriously a close call. Honestly,

after the earthquake this spring, I thought they'd just throw in the towel on this whole graduation ceremony—"

"Uh-huh," Robin said. Her gaze was once again pinned on the clouds. Nancy thought that it had probably been a bad idea for Robin to join in with the tossing of the mortarboards, because without that shade, her ears were starting to turn bright red under the glare of the sun.

Vickie carried on, her onslaught unstoppable. "—but I'm glad that we were all able to get together and just be like, *whew*, you know? We made it. And I mean, who knows how many more times we're all gonna be able to see each other, now that we're not trapped in the same building for eight hours a day." She gave an awkward little chuckle. "Like, we're not even volunteering together anymore, right? Which isn't a—that's not a ding on you, I'm just saying we miss you at the hospital."

Nancy shot a sideways look to Jonathan, searching for anything to keep her from getting swept away on the tidal wave of Vickie's monologue. She found him glancing back and forth at Vickie and Robin, some spark of understanding kindling in his face. A small smile tweaked the corner of his mouth. "What is it?" Nancy whispered to him.

He just shook his head. "I think we're almost through," he said, pointing at the nearing bleachers. Through the thinning crush ahead of them, Nancy could pick out the diminutive shape of Joyce Byers waving near the front. Steve stood a few steps behind her, splitting his attention between peering intently into the crowd and checking his watch. He made eye contact with Nancy and smiled awkwardly before tearing his gaze pointedly away.

"What a weirdo," Robin muttered at Nancy's shoulder. Nancy glanced over to see Robin shaking her head at Steve's antics. "Wait—Nance—isn't that the commencement speaker lady talking to your mom?"

Nancy squinted in the direction she was pointing. Sure enough, halfway up the bleachers, Georgia Miller stood talking and laughing with Karen Wheeler, while Nancy's dad, Ted, checked his watch and Mike and Holly played some complicated hand-slapping game that Nancy was 95 percent sure they'd made up themselves.

"Are they…friends?" Robin asked.

Nancy shook her head. “No idea. Hey.” She turned back to Jonathan and Robin. “Congrats to us,” she said. “I didn’t say it yet.” Grabbing Jonathan’s hand, she gave it a squeeze. “I’ll see you at dinner?”

“I talked Mom out of cooking,” Jonathan said. “You’re welcome.”

“Ooh, I see my parents,” Robin said, bouncing up and down. “I’ll catch you guys later. Uh…” She glanced at Vickie and then away again quickly. Jonathan swallowed a cough. “You too, Vickie.”

Nancy didn’t stick around for whatever one-woman-show Vickie came back with. With another squeeze to Jonathan’s hand and a wave to Robin, she threaded out of the crowd and made her way up the bleacher steps toward the Wheeler clan.

“Congratulations, sweetheart!” her mother exclaimed when she saw Nancy coming. A second later, Nancy was enveloped in a cloud of hairspray and hugs as her mother wrapped her arms around her. Nancy’s father followed a second later, his awkward “Great work” belied by his warm embrace.

“Pretty cool” was what she got from Mike, once she emerged from between her parents.

Nancy stuck her tongue out at him.

“Are we done now?” Holly wanted to know.

Nancy’s mom had a way of smiling that said both *How sweet* and *You better behave* at the same time. Holly subsided under the brunt of it, sinking back down onto the bleachers in defeat.

“Thanks,” Nancy said to her family at large, then turned to Georgia. “Uh…hi.”

“Right, right!” Mom flapped her hands, summoning an introduction out of thin air. “This is Georgia Miller—which you know, obviously. She went to school with me and your father. And Georgia…” She wrapped an arm around Nancy’s shoulders, giving her a squeeze. “You remember Nancy?”

“Oh my gosh. *Nancy.*” Georgia clasped both hands under her chin, taking Nancy in. “I can’t believe it. You know, it’s crazy enough seeing how big your siblings are, but this is the first time I’m meeting them. *You*,

though. The last time we saw one another, you were”—she glanced at Mom for help—“how old?”

Mom smiled. “Ten months.”

Georgia winced, then tried for a smile. “So you’re saying you’re on solid foods now?”

“I can even use a knife and fork on my own,” Nancy said. “It’s really great to meet you. Or—see you again. I loved your speech.”

Georgia laughed. “You’re very polite.”

“Mom, can I go find Will?” Mike asked, tugging at their mother’s sleeve.

“We’re *talking*, Michael,” she said before turning an apologetic smile to Georgia. “Nancy *is* polite. I wish I could say that about *all* my children.”

“I’m polite!” Holly protested.

Dad patted her on the head. “You tell ’em, kid.”

“And just to say,” Nancy cut in, before her family could embarrass her any further, “I’m not just being polite. I really did love your speech. ‘*Live like your future is certain.*’ ”

“Well, thank you, Nancy.” It wasn’t an empty statement. There was genuine gratitude on Georgia’s face. “It means a lot to hear that.”

Nancy nudged her mother’s shoulder with her own. “I can’t believe you’ve known the head of H&H since *high school* and you never told us.” She grinned at Georgia. “Actually, I can’t believe that the head of H&H *went* to this high school.”

“I didn’t think *anyone* was from Hawkins,” Mike muttered, still sullen at not being allowed to escape and look for his friends.

Georgia shrugged. “Well, I am. Not that I’ve been back in…a while.”

“ ‘A while’—sure.” There was a brittle edge to Mom’s chirpy tone. “Long enough for a baby to graduate from high school.”

“Maybe more than a while,” Georgia amended. “When I left for college, I thought I’d be graduating with my ‘MRS degree’ and a ring on my finger. If you asked my mother, that was the plan, anyway.” She snorted. “But when I got to Boston and realized there wasn’t a man on that campus I wanted to touch with a ten-foot pole, that plan changed.”

Nancy's ears perked up. "Boston? You went to school in Boston?"

"Oh, that's right!" Mom exclaimed. She was so over-the-top animated that her expression bordered on pantomime. "I can't believe it. I never put that together before. Georgia, Nancy's headed to Emerson in the fall!"

Nobody would ever give Karen Wheeler an Oscar. Even Nancy's dad looked confused. "What? Sweetheart, you were just talking about it this morning—"

He broke off on a pained gasp as his wife dug her kitten heel delicately into his foot. "It must have slipped my mind since then," Mom said sweetly.

"Well, that's wonderful, Nancy," Georgia said, pulling off the herculean task of ignoring the antics of the Wheeler Family Circus. "Boston's a great town. I'd be happy to show you around once you're out there."

"Honestly, I'd love that," Nancy said. There was something warm blooming in her stomach—the same thing she'd felt during Georgia's speech. "*The future is bright*."

"And I don't know much about Emerson—I'm a BU grad—but your mother was telling me about your work at *The Hawkins Post*. Journalism major?"

"That's the plan."

"Journalism's a tough field," Georgia said, and then she grinned at Nancy. "But something tells me you're up for it."

Nancy tucked those words somewhere deep inside her chest for safekeeping.

"Oh my God. *Georgia*." Mom snapped her fingers as an idea hit her—for real this time, which only cast the phony edge to her previous exclamation in sharper relief. "You'll never guess who's in charge of *The Hawkins Post* these days. *Sean. Pullman*."

Georgia clapped a hand over her mouth. "With the glasses? *That* Sean?"

Nancy could read the signs of a catch-up conversation that would take *hours*, if it was given the chance, from a mile away. She twisted around, finding Robin, who was striking her one thousandth begrudging pose for her mother's Nikon.

“And one looking over your shoulder, sweetie,” Mrs. Buckley prompted, snapping the shutter. “The light is just so *perfect*.”

Help me, Robin mouthed to Nancy.

“Hey, Mom? I’m gonna go catch up with some of my friends,” Nancy announced, just quiet enough so that her mom wouldn’t be able to hear her. When the conversation between her mother and Georgia continued on without the slightest hitch, Nancy knew she’d been right on target.

“Why do you get to go and I don’t?” Mike whispered, watching Nancy ease back from the Wheeler huddle.

She made a face at him. “It’s my graduation.”

“I’ll tell Mom.”

“I’ll get your girlfriend to explode your brain,” she whispered back. “I just need a second.”

He rolled his eyes but didn’t protest any further. That was probably as close to a sign-off as she was going to get from him, so she took advantage, sidling into his gangly, tall shadow and then slipping into the crowd behind him.

“Hey!” Robin greeted her as she approached.

“Oh my gosh. Girls, both of you, together.” Mrs. Buckley waved Nancy into Robin’s orbit. “And…smile.”

Nancy was starting to feel like she’d gone from the frying pan to the fire as the shutter clicked. “This is a lot, huh?” she muttered out of the corner of her mouth.

“Don’t forget to smile!” Mrs. Buckley called from behind her camera.

“That’s underselling it,” Robin muttered back. The grin she had fixed on her face was starting to slip into grimace territory, and Nancy was reasonably sure hers was doing the same. “So your parents are getting all cozy with Mrs. Hearth & Home?”

“*Ms.* Hearth & Home.”

Robin’s eyebrows twitched. “Ohoho. An independent woman.”

“They’re school friends,” Nancy said. “Georgia and my mom. Apparently.”

“She seems cool.”

“She does,” Nancy agreed. “She’s smart. And I think she’s based in Boston.”

“A Nancy Wheeler type?”

Nancy snorted. “You know what Seth said when she first walked up to speak?”

“I don’t think I want to.”

“ ‘She’s hot.’ I mean, Jesus Christ. Wait, what did you say?”

She thought she’d caught Robin muttering, *He’s not wrong*, under her breath, but when she glanced over, she was just staring fixedly into her mother’s camera lens. “I said, ‘What a dingus,’ ” Robin said.

“Oh, girls!” Mrs. Buckley chirped. “I think we’re getting a glare. Would you step up on that riser?”

Nancy and Robin obligingly shuffled up. Nancy had to steady Robin to keep her from overbalancing and taking a header into the crowd, but eventually they were successfully situated. From her new vantage point, Nancy could see over the heads of the people below her. She absently surveyed the crowd as Mrs. Buckley played Ansel Adams and Robin dissociated at her side.

For some reason, Nancy’s eyes kept returning to one particular cluster of students on the other side of the bleachers. There were four of them, and Nancy vaguely recalled that they had all been in the marching band. But it wasn’t like she really *knew* them. Despite spending four years trudging through the same hallways, she didn’t think she’d exchanged more than a couple words with any of them. So why was she so interested?

One of the kids looked over his shoulder, and Nancy realized she was looking at the same face she’d seen on the other side of Seth Travers during the ceremony. Joey Taft didn’t seem nearly as invested in the conversation as his friends were. He kept scanning around behind him, his shoulders hunched up around his ears. It looked like he was expecting someone to haul off out of nowhere and land a punch on him. Or worse.

It also looked *familiar*. And maybe it was her bird’s-eye view, but Nancy had the dawning realization that she knew *why.*

Paranoia. Twitchiness. Anxiety. Nancy had seen that cocktail before…on Fred Benson. On Max. In the days just before Vecna turned them inside out.

The thought sent a rush of cold adrenaline through her. This wasn't faulty wiring or thin walls. Could it be that Vecna had chosen another target? Had he finally stuck his head out of his hidey-hole? Had he made his move?

No. She couldn't let herself get carried away, not unless she wanted another lightbulb to blow up in her face. *Be smart, Nancy. Start from the beginning*.

"Hey," she whispered, leaning sideways into Robin. "You know that kid, right?"

Robin followed the direction of Nancy's gaze, scanning the sea of people. "Which kid?"

"That guy." Nancy pointed. "Joey."

Robin nodded. "Oh—yeah! Yeah, we're in marching band together. Or, actually, we *were*. Man, it's gonna be so weird talking about that stuff in the past tense. Graduation's already messing with my brain—"

"Robin," Nancy cut in, before Robin's rambling could really get going. "Does anything about him look…familiar?"

Robin slid her a confused glance. "Like I just said, I *know* him—"

"Does anything about how he's *acting* look familiar?"

She watched Robin squint across the bleachers, inspecting Joey. Even at this distance, it was impossible to miss his flightiness, the way he flinched back from the excited gestures of his friends. Nancy could also make out deep bruise-purple smudges beneath his eyes that she was pretty certain weren't just shadows.

"He looks like shit," Robin said. It was a flip comment on the surface, but Robin's phrasing was…slow. Like there was a thought percolating beneath the surface. Like it was the same thought percolating inside of Nancy.

"Uh-huh," Nancy said.

"You don't think—"

"I don't know," Nancy said. "But he sure looks…haunted."

“That could be anything,” Robin said. It sounded like she was trying to convince herself more than Nancy. “I mean, how many reasons does a high schooler in Hawkins, Indiana, have to be jumping at shadows?”

Joey’s friends threw back their heads to laugh. Joey looked like he was on the verge of crawling out of his skin.

Robin, seeing this, spoke even faster. “You heard that, like, *litany* of tragedy that Higgins rattled off up there. Joey could be in full mourning or something. Or maybe there’s shit going on at home. It could be anything.”

“Uh-huh,” said Nancy again. “*Including* the possibility…that Joey Taft is Vecna’s next target.”

On the other side of the bleachers, Joey said something to his friends. One of them wrapped him in a hug. Another gave him a high five, which Joey only half-heartedly reciprocated. Nancy realized he was about to leave. “Shit,” she said, watching as he set off into the dispersing crowd.

She only hesitated a second. Then she was hopping down from the riser, setting off after him, shoving into the throng of her classmates as she struggled to keep on Joey’s tail.

“See you at the car, Mom!” Robin called. Then she was at Nancy’s elbow, tagging along in her wake. “Should we grab the others?” Robin asked, ducking around the enthusiastically flailing sleeve of someone’s graduation robe.

After last night? “I just want to talk to him first.”

She couldn’t see whatever expression was on Robin’s face, and that was probably a good thing. “Then come on,” Robin said, shoving ahead of Nancy and clearing a path to the edge of the crowd.

Nancy had to trot to keep up with Robin’s longer stride, but when she realized Robin was leading them toward the school gym, she frowned. “Where are you going? The parking lot’s through—”

“You gotta shake this driver-centric mindset if you’re gonna be moving to the Big City, Nance,” Robin scolded, yanking open the doors and ushering Nancy inside. “Not everyone gets around with four wheels and a combustion engine.”

Any doubts Nancy might have had about Robin's shortcut evaporated when they emerged from Hawkins High's front doors right next to the bike rack—and found Joey Taft wrangling the banged-up old lock off his bicycle.

It was the only bike on the rack, which made sense—how many kids biked solo to their own graduation? But that meant Joey had nowhere to hide when Nancy waved one arm wildly over her head. "Joey! Hey!"

She hadn't expected the full-body flinch that ran through him at the sound of her voice. He twitched around to stare at her, seeming to shrink as he retreated back into his bike. "Wh—what?"

It was impossible to maintain eye contact with him. Just like on the field during the ceremony, his gaze never stayed still, glancing constantly from her to their surroundings and back again. He looked paranoid. Or, more accurately, he looked *terrified*.

One more point in the Vecna column, Nancy thought.

"Hey," she said, holding out her hands and slowing her pace as she approached. As skittish as Joey already was, she didn't want to give him a reason to run away. "I just wanted to…check on you."

Massive confusion broke through the fear on Joey's face, and honestly, Nancy couldn't blame him. This was the most the two of them had ever spoken, and now Nancy was chasing him down after graduation with the most cardboard-flimsy sentiment she could muster.

"I'm fine," he said and turned his attention back to his bike lock.

"You seemed upset, back at the ceremony," Nancy said, still inching toward him. Robin followed a few paces behind her. "Any…particular reason?"

"No."

She wasn't about to let some kid's short tone put her off. "I want to help, Joey," she said. "If there's anything you're going through, maybe anything you're…experiencing."

The jingle of his bike chain grew louder as he fumbled with it, and Nancy realized his hands were shaking.

Encouraged, she plowed onward. “Whatever you have going on, you can tell me. Even if you think it’s too weird. Even if you think nobody is going to believe you—”

“Are you deaf?” Joey bit out. He’d finally managed to work his bike chain free, and now he was tugging his bicycle out of the rack. “I said *no*.”

But now Nancy was close enough to grab his handlebars. She held the bike in place, desperation driving her words out low and quick. “I know you feel alone right now. I know you feel like nobody in the entire world will understand what you’re going through. But you’re not alone—”

He rattled his bike frame. “Let go.”

“Telling me what’s going on will help you. It’ll help more people than you can possibly—”

With one last wrench of effort, Joey yanked his bike out of Nancy’s hands. “*No!*”

“But—”

“Okay.” Robin said, stepping forward to place a quelling hand on Nancy’s shoulder. “Getting just a teensy heated over here, and I’m *really* not looking forward to scheduling some kind of a pistols-at-dawn situation the first day after graduation, so let’s take it down a notch or two. Sound doable? Nancy?”

Nancy swallowed her urgency and managed a nod.

“Spectacular.” Robin gave Nancy’s shoulder an approving little pat. “Joey?”

Joey just swung a leg over the seat of his bike. “What the *hell,* Robin?”

“You know, I get that a lot,” Robin said. “And listen, I know my friend here can come on a little bit strong, and you don’t know her—”

“You’re right. I *don’t.*”

Joey kicked a foot up onto one of the pedals, and Robin rushed to continue. “I hear that. I’m hearing you. But trust me when I say that that’s actually one of her better qualities. And sometimes one of her worst ones. But even if you don’t know Nancy, you do know *me*. Right? The bond of marching band is forever.”

He hadn’t kicked off yet. He actually wasn’t moving much at all, besides the muscle jumping in his narrow jaw. Nancy held her breath—*waiting, waiting, always waiting.*

Robin leaned in closer to Joey, shutting out the rest of the world. “If there’s something going on, it’s okay to tell us. Me. I’ll make Nancy cover her ears if that helps.”

Nancy gaped. “*Hey!*”

“Even if you think it’s too huge or too weird to share. Secrets kinda suck.” Robin’s mouth twisted into something sour. “But if I’ve learned anything over the last few months, it’s that talking about this stuff helps. Actually, sometimes talking about it is all we’ve got. So. If you want to—”

There was a creak. Nancy realized it was the strain of the aluminum handlebars under Joey’s white-knuckled grip. He was holding on to something, or holding himself back, or—

“I can’t,” he said, and for the first time since Nancy had clocked him at the ceremony, his eyes were steady, pinned on Robin. “I mean, um, there’s nothing to tell.”

Are you sure? The question was right at the tip of Nancy’s tongue, as prodding and pushy as Robin had just accused her of being. But Robin was already stepping back with an accepting nod, putting plenty of space between herself and Joey.

“Sure,” she said agreeably. “We just had to check.”

Joey took a deep breath. It filled every centimeter of space inside of him, then drained out all at once. “I gotta go.”

“Sure,” Robin said again. “Um, but, you still have my number, right? From the band contact sheet? Cause even though we graduated, you can call me. Whenever you want.”

For a long moment, Joey stood as still as a statue, frozen in place on his bike. Nancy wasn’t sure whether Robin’s words had landed or whether he’d even heard them at all.

Then, without any warning, he was kicking his pedal forward, racing out of the school parking lot so quickly that he almost blurred.

“You think he’ll call you?” Nancy asked, watching him go.

“I hope he’s got nothing to call *about*,” Robin said.
I don’t, Nancy thought, with a twinge of guilt.

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Chapter Four

"To the graduates!"

Nancy obediently raised her glass, taking care to cheers with each person at the table—even Holly, who insisted on clinking glasses with Nancy twice. It took the better part of a minute, since the Wheeler dining room was more full than usual—the Byers family had joined them for a celebratory dinner. Nancy's mother had been toiling in the kitchen for days now, sweating over every tiny facet of the meal. Now it was spread out in front of them—a glistening spiral-cut ham, roasted green beans, whipped potatoes, all plated beautifully and carefully on Nana Dot's best china. It looked delicious. It looked *perfect*.

If only Nancy were hungry.

She picked at the pile of food on her plate, absently excavating channels into her potatoes. She couldn't put the look on Joey Taft's face out of her mind. In fact, she wasn't sure she *wanted* to. Just knowing there was an actual *lead*—it was the best news she'd had in months. Or, if she was being realistic, it was the best news she'd had since the *last* lead, even if that lead had been a dud.

She needed to tell Jonathan. Unfortunately, there hadn't been a moment to so much as breathe since his family had arrived bearing two bottles of red wine and a pre-sliced loaf of Big Buy sourdough, much less have a private conversation with her boyfriend. All Nancy could do at the moment was joggle her knee in place and try not to look like she was dying inside as she sipped demurely at the half glass of wine her mother had poured for her.

"I'm so proud of you," Joyce murmured to Jonathan as she leaned her shoulder into his. She was sitting between her sons, across the table from

Nancy, Mike, and Holly, which meant Nancy had a great view of the pleased smile that broke across Jonathan's face.

"Thanks, Mom," he whispered, nudging her back.

"It's really cool," Will agreed, leaning around Joyce to give his brother a sweet smile.

Nancy stared at the side of Jonathan's head, doing her best to convey *We need to talk ASAP* with just her eyes, but it was Joyce who looked over first. She grimaced, obviously taking the look on Nancy's face for dismay, and gave Nancy a conciliatory smile. "I'm proud of you too, Nancy. Head of the school paper, honors society, *and* a perfect GPA? You're a very smart cookie."

Damn it. Nancy dropped her attempt at telepathy just as Jonathan glanced up at her. "Thank you," she said.

"You're lucky you were able to pull it off, sweetheart," her father chimed in. "If your teachers hadn't been so forgiving these last few months —"

"*Ted*," Mom said. There was a *thump* as her shoe collided with his shin underneath the table.

He yelped. "Ow! What—Was that some kind of secret?"

Nancy didn't join her mother in protesting. Her dad was right. Ever since the earthquake, Nancy's focus had been on anything *but* her schoolwork—she'd lost herself in searching for any sign of Vecna. Then again, she wasn't exactly alone. For the past few months, *nobody* in Hawkins—and certainly no student at Hawkins High—had been able to concentrate on much besides the earthquake's aftermath. In deference to this, and to the fact that at least a quarter of the student body had lost their houses or simply fled town, the final-exam situation had been…forgiving, to say the least.

The Nancy of last year, who'd prided herself on her work ethic and essay-writing prowess, might have taken issue with that. The Nancy of today had bigger things on her plate.

Like the mountain of food her mother had served her. And now that Nancy had glanced over in her direction, she could see that her mother was

studying her—and the intricate artwork she was making out of two slices of bread and a lattice of green beans. Nancy hurried to run her knife through the whole thing and shove a bite in her mouth.

“It was crazy seeing Georgia again,” Joyce commented, valiantly ignoring the under-the-breath litany of complaints that was steadily escaping Nancy’s father. “I never thought she’d be back in Hawkins.”

“Who knew Georgia Miller of all people would wind up a damn CEO?” Dad asked.

“*Language*, darling,” Mom warned through a locked jaw.

“What’s a damn CEO?” Holly wanted to know as she tried to shove a postcard-size chunk of ham into her mouth in one piece.

“Mike.” Nancy shoved her elbow into her brother’s side. “Could you make sure she doesn’t *die*?”

“I can do it,” Holly protested, but she didn’t fight back as Mike took her fork and started cutting her meat into bites a human child could actually manage. Across the table, Will buried a laugh in his potatoes.

“A CEO,” Nancy said, avoiding any potentially explosive four-letter words, “is the person in charge of a company. An organization. They’re the person who tells everyone else what to do and what the company is going to do.”

“They’re the boss,” Holly said, like she’d known that was the answer all along.

“Georgia offered to show Nancy around Boston this fall,” Mom said, blithely sawing a green bean in half. “Once she’s out there for school. Jonathan, if you’re interested, I’m sure she’d take you along as well.”

Jonathan coughed his way through a mouthful of food, waving off Will, who tried to thump him on the back. “This fall? Oh—”

“Once you’re at Emerson,” Mom said.

“Right, right.” Jonathan managed to get his coughing under control, setting down his knife and fork before any more food could try to kill him. Nancy watched this happen from beneath her eyelashes. From the unnatural stillness up and down the table, she could tell that most of the dinner guests

were doing something similar; Joyce, Will, Jonathan, and Mike had all simultaneously dissociated at the mere mention of a post-Vecna future.

Encouraging.

"Jonathan's probably going to be too busy with his photography to get dragged along with me and Georgia, Mom," Nancy said, offering Jonathan an out.

It wasn't quite enough to fool Mom, whose eyes flicked from face to face, a puzzled line etched between her eyebrows. Still, she was *way* too polite to call attention to the obviously weird dynamic, particularly not in front of Nana Dot's Wedgwood soup tureen. "I guess there is a lot to take pictures of in Boston," she said slowly. "Architecture. Monuments."

"Maybe you could dig up Paul Revere," Mike offered, and Nancy genuinely couldn't tell whether he was trying to help or not.

"Thanks, Mike," said Jonathan, who obviously shared Nancy's uncertainty. "I'll, uh, I'll think about it. But you know, to tell you the truth, it's been a little hard to even *think* about…college right now."

Joyce rubbed a comforting hand down Jonathan's back. "It's just been go-go-go since we got back," she said. "If Jonathan isn't at school, then he's applying for jobs, and if he isn't applying for jobs, then he's helping me look for a place to stay."

And if he wasn't looking for a place to stay, then he was out with me running down another Vecna dead end, Nancy thought. She shoved another piece of ham into her mouth to help tamp down the swell of guilt.

"Mom, c'mon," Jonathan said quietly.

"Oh. Sorry, sweetheart, was that—"

"This is what I'm talking about," Dad jumped in. "Secrets that you don't know are secrets."

"Still no luck on housing?" Mom asked.

Joyce shook her head. "Everything is either unlivable or out of our price range. It's been…tough."

And the temporary military shelter they've been living in is built to be—temporary, Nancy thought, filling in the bleak blanks that Joyce was leaving

unsaid. She'd heard enough from Jonathan about his family's grim living situation to rattle off her own ranting monologue.

"It's hard to think about things like Boston when things are so up in the air at home," Jonathan said.

"You'll find a place soon," Nancy told him. "Something will turn up."

The look on Jonathan's face was inscrutable. "Yeah?"

She gave his hand a reassuring squeeze. "Absolutely. Will and your mom'll be living somewhere awesome by the time we leave for college. Probably so awesome that you won't want to go."

Mom took a large gulp of her wine.

Mike tried to say something through a mouthful of potatoes. His tone was the only reason Nancy could tell it had been a question.

"Gross," she said.

He swallowed. "I was just saying, why don't they stay with us?"

An awkward moment stretched. Joyce exchanged commiserating grimaces with Nancy's mother. "That's very sweet of you to ask—" Joyce began.

"Awesome," Mike said. "Will can share my room, and you guys can—I don't know, Mom'll figure it out."

Mom cleared her throat. "Mike."

"What?"

"We can't put you out," Joyce said.

"I don't mind sharing," Will offered. "It'll be like a sleepover."

"Will," Jonathan cautioned. "I think what Mom is saying is—we *won't* put them out."

"But Joyce is right," Mom said smoothly. "It was very sweet of you to ask, Michael."

Mike sank back in his chair, mumbling something rebellious that sounded like *I don't get it.*

Nancy tried to catch Jonathan's eye. He was staring down at his plate, making patterns in his food as well. When Nancy looked back around, she found her mom watching her with an expression that was equal parts sympathy and concern.

“Well,” Mom said, pushing back from the table, “who wants dessert?”

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Chapter Five

"It's been a little hard to even think about college right now."

Two hours later, Nancy sat behind the wheel of her station wagon, idling at a red light. She could hear Jonathan's words running through her head like a looped tape, a foreign language she was struggling to decipher.

"A little hard to even think about college."

"Hard to think about college."

Behind her, someone leaned on their car horn. The traffic light had turned green. Nancy shook her head, hoping that would somehow break the looping memory, waved an apologetic hand out her window, and shifted the station wagon into gear.

Pull yourself together, she thought as she rolled down the street. The frustrated driver who'd been stuck behind her took the opportunity to punch the gas and gun it around her. Nancy resisted the urge to use her friendly waving hand to flip him off. *Jonathan is just stressed. He didn't mean it.*

But what if he did? What if Jonathan really was having second thoughts about heading off to Emerson in the fall? What if he didn't think it was possible?

It is. She thought it savagely, driving away any question or doubt that tried to creep in. They would find Vecna. They would eliminate him. They would save the world. And then she'd be in Boston, living life like Georgia Miller, far, far from the white picket fences of Hawkins that had always been threatening to pen her in.

But despite these affirmations, her heart was still hammering in her ears when she parked outside a small, adorable house off Willow Avenue, and Nancy allowed herself one bracing breath as she pulled her keys out of the

ignition. Then she was grabbing her purse off the passenger seat and trudging up the short path to the front door.

Robin answered at Nancy's first knock, a confused smile spreading across her face. "Oh—hey, I didn't know you were coming by."

"I just needed to get out of my house," Nancy said. "Dinner was—"

"Robin? Who's there?" Mrs. Buckley popped up over her daughter's shoulder. "Oh, Nancy!"

Nancy waved. "Hi, Mrs. Buckley—"

"Come in, come in." Mrs. Buckley physically moved Robin aside to make space in the doorway.

"I don't want to intrude if you're doing family stuff—"

But Mrs. Buckley was already bustling back into the depths of the house. "Just shut the door behind you! The mosquitoes are hell this time of year."

A little nonplussed at the Buckley whirlwind, Nancy blinked up at Robin. "Um."

"So. Dinner," Robin prompted. "You said it was…"

"Uh-huh."

Robin cocked her head. "You wanna talk about it?"

"I stole a six-pack from my dad's beer fridge."

"That's a yes." Robin nodded inside. "Let's go to the roof."

One of Nancy's favorite things about the Buckley house—outside of the lack of Wheeler family expectations and the absence of the cloud of shame that gathered every time Nancy lied to her mom—was the roof. A screened-in porch jutted from the side of the house right beneath Robin's bedroom window, and the roof of that porch had become Robin's makeshift balcony. Was it structurally sound? Who could say? But either way, Robin had long ago dragged a couple of folding chairs out onto the gently slanting asphalt shingles and claimed it as her own.

The first time Robin had invited Nancy up to hang out, Nancy had found herself weirdly taken aback by the idea that Robin would climb out her bedroom window onto the roof and then just…stay there. In Nancy's

experience, bedroom windows were for illicit exits and entrances. Once you were out, you were *gone*. Who would linger?

Maybe somebody who didn't feel like the exits were closing.

Nancy cracked open a can of Old Style, settling back in her chair. Robin did the same. The stars were out tonight, blanketing the sky overhead—not always a given, between the haze of military floodlights and the menacing, forever-glow of the Rift.

"Hey." Robin held her can out toward Nancy. "Congrats, grad."

It was cheesy, the kind of thing that you'd write on the inside of a terrible Hallmark card. Still, Nancy grinned, tapping her can against Robin's. "Congrats, grad." They took simultaneous sips—and fought back identical grimaces as the taste of the shitty beer hit them.

"Jesus," Robin said. "Hey, next time, maybe you grab something that doesn't make me want to burn my tastebuds off."

"My mom keeps her wine under lock and key," Nancy said. "It was this or Miller Lite."

"Bleak." Robin took another sip, admitting defeat. "So. Dinner. Didn't you eat with the Byerses?"

"Yeah."

"Sounds like kind of an idyllic situation. I mean, dinner with the in-laws, that's pretty pristine. Rockwellian, I would even say. Was there a ham? I bet there was a ham."

"There was a ham."

"Knew it." Robin took a victorious swig of her beer, and the look on her face told Nancy that she instantly regretted it. "Meanwhile, my mom tried out a new bean salad recipe, and let's just say—"

Nancy choked on her beer, holding up a hand to fend off the end of that sentence. "Let's not."

Robin grinned. "Fine."

"It's just—there was this weird moment. My mom brought up college, right? In the fall. And all of a sudden it was like…" She blew her bangs out of her eyes. "It was like everyone at that table who—who *knows*, you

know? They all kind of checked out. They didn't even want to *talk* about it."

"The fall…" Robin said, a little distant.

"And listen, I know we've got a pretty freaking big mountain to climb before we get there," Nancy went on. "But we're going to do it. And by September, we're going to be out of here."

"You sound like Georgia Miller," Robin said. " *'Live like your future is certain,'* or whatever."

"I guess I do," Nancy said with a little shrug. "Can you blame me? It's pretty good advice."

Robin opened her mouth to answer, but she was interrupted by a strange sound that filtered through her open bedroom window, half static and half human voice. Nancy stiffened in her chair, the aluminum can crunching beneath her fingers.

"Whoa there," Robin said, clocking Nancy's reaction. "No Upside Down shenanigans here."

Nancy forced herself to unclench her fist. "What *was* that?"

"That was. Uh." Robin gave a sheepish little smile. "That."

She pointed through her bedroom window, toward something on her desk. Twisting in her chair to get a better look, Nancy made out the unmistakable, boxy black-and-gray outline of…

"A police scanner?"

"I got it after the quake," Robin said.

"And you just…listen to it?" Nancy snapped her fingers as an explanation occurred to her. "Right. For Vecna news."

"Mm," Robin hummed. "Or for—"

"Robin?"

Robin and Nancy scrambled to hide their still-full beer cans as Mrs. Buckley poked her head through Robin's bedroom door. She squinted through the window, out into the nighttime gloom. "Are you girls still out there?"

"Yeah—uh, yeah, Mom," Robin stammered. "We're here. Everything okay?"

“Sure, sweetie. You just have a phone call.”

Nancy and Robin shared an uncertain glance. *Steve?* Nancy mouthed.

Robin shrugged. “Who is it?” she called back in to her mom.

“A young man,” Mrs. Buckley said with a teasing lilt. “He says his name is Joey.”

“Joey,” Robin repeated, flat.

“Joey *Taft*?” Nancy asked.

“Are you going to pick up the phone?” Mrs. Buckley asked, irritation starting to drown out the lightness in her voice. “Or do I have to remind you that I’m not your secretary?”

“Mom, oh my God,” Robin said, rolling her eyes with fond annoyance. “Yes, hang on a second.”

Mrs. Buckley blew a kiss through the window and retreated through the bedroom door, leaving it open. Nancy caught Robin’s arm as Robin stood to climb back inside. “Joey?” Her heart was pounding in her throat. “Do you think—Vecna?”

“We won’t know until we talk to him,” Robin said. “And when we do, do me a favor? Don’t sound so eager about it?”

“I’m not *eager*—” Nancy protested, but Robin was already clambering over the windowsill and back into her bedroom.

The Buckleys had only one telephone, another facet of their house that somehow loosened the anxiety that usually winched tight in Nancy’s chest. Here, there was never a risk that someone was listening in on the other line—not her mom taking some well-intentioned stab at involvement, not her dad grouching about how much time she was spending on the phone, not *anybody.* The flip side was that the phone was in the family room—which was, of course, frequently occupied by family.

At least, Nancy reasoned, if there were prying ears in the Buckley household, they weren’t being sneaky about it.

Robin was already picking up the receiver when Nancy caught up to her, flashing apologetic smiles to Mrs. Buckley, who was busying herself at the record player, flipping an LP over to the B-side, and Mr. Buckley, who smiled back over the top of his dog-eared paperback copy of *On the Road*.

“Joey, huh?” he whispered at Nancy, waggling his bushy eyebrows as she hustled to Robin’s side.

“Hah,” Nancy said, doing her best to press her ear to the receiver next to Robin’s, straining to make out the faint words that filtered through. She didn’t miss the exaggerated *Boys* that Mrs. Buckley mouthed to her husband, but it would have been impossible not to; astronauts on the moon would have picked it up.

Robin certainly had—her cheeks flamed bright red as she muttered into the telephone. “Joey? Hey.”

“Hey, uh—Robin?” If Joey had sounded wigged out at graduation twelve hours ago, that was nothing compared to now. His voice shook with stress, paranoia—*fear*. And even though Nancy had protested Robin’s accusation a moment before, she couldn’t help the swell of excitement that bubbled up in her stomach. *This is it. This is what we’ve been waiting for. This is it.*

She must have done a pretty shitty job at hiding it, because the glare Robin shot her was poisonous. “Yeah, I’m here,” she said. “What’s, uh”—she glanced back over her shoulder at her absolutely-not-eavesdropping parents—“what’s up?”

“Can you meet me tonight?”

“Oh, God,” Robin muttered, with a wince that seemed more internal than outward. Nancy, for her part, did her best to fight back a wave of disappointment. With an opening like that, it seemed as though Joey’s intentions aligned more with the Buckleys’ assumptions than Nancy’s guilty hopes.

Thankfully Joey didn’t seem to have heard Robin’s aside. “What?”

Robin let out a huff, running a hand through her hair. “Never mind. Um. I don’t know, Joey. Things are a little—you know, with graduation, I’ve got a bunch of family stuff and—”

“Please.”

Now *that* wasn’t the voice of a boy who was trying and failing to ask a girl out. There was something desperate there. Something *awful.*

And Robin heard it as loud and clear as Nancy had. Her posture shifted, closing off as she focused in on the voice in the telephone. “Sure, hey, hey—I can totally meet you. Can you just give me maybe a little hint? What’s going on?”

“You know how you said I should come to you and…I could tell you if I was in trouble? Even if I thought there was no way in hell you’d believe me?”

If Nancy’s heart beat any harder, it was going to explode in her chest. And if the muscle jumping in Robin’s jaw was any indication, she was in the same boat. “Yeah, I—I remember.”

“Well, I’m in trouble,” Joey said. “And whether you believe me or not—I need help.”

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Chapter Six

The warm breeze whipped through the open windows of the Wheeler Wagon as Nancy gunned it toward the edge of town.

“Jesus, Wheeler!” Robin yelped from the passenger seat. She had one hand wrapped around the edge of window and the other gripping at the dashboard. “You know there are speed limits? And like ten million different kinds of extremely bored police patrolling this town, frothing at the *mouth* for someone to bust?”

“If you see someone, flag it for me,” Nancy said, not lifting her foot from the gas pedal. She hung a left at Old River Road, so fast that her right two wheels left the ground for a second. Robin bit back a swear. It was the rocking *thump* as the car landed squarely on the ground again that jarred a little sense into Nancy. *You won’t get to Joey at all if you flip the car*, she told herself and took a deep, calming breath, forcing herself to ease off the gas.

“Thank you,” Robin said fervently. “You *maniac.*”

Joey had asked Robin to meet him at the covered bridge way on the outskirts of town. It was a spot that was more known for covert hookups and low-stakes drug deals than…whatever Joey had going on, but Nancy had been halfway out the door as soon as she heard the words drop from his mouth.

“Should we call someone?” Robin had asked, once she’d made her excuses to her parents and followed Nancy out to the car. “Hopper or Joyce or—and don’t hate me for saying this—Steve? Jonathan?”

A series of sad, beseeching gazes flashed across Nancy’s vision. *Jonathan’s eyes. Steve’s eyes.* All waiting for an answer from her. “We

will," she'd told Robin, climbing into the driver's seat and cranking her key in the ignition. "But right now we don't have time. Joey's counting on us. He needs our help."

Even now, as they closed in on the covered bridge, Nancy could still feel the skeptical squint Robin had leveled at her in response—which was fair, honestly. Nancy didn't buy her line either. But the sooner they got to Joey, the sooner they'd be able to forget any questions about Nancy's real motivations.

As they approached the bridge and the deep stream that it spanned, the road narrowed to a single lane. Nancy parked on the shoulder and turned the engine off. Without the headlights, she was suddenly reminded of how dark it could get in the middle of nowhere.

The two girls swung out of the car and walked toward the bridge. "Joey?" Robin called into the gloom. "Hey…Joey?"

The only response was an owl hooting somewhere in the bridge's rafters. It fluttered away on silent wings as they drew nearer.

"I should have brought my flashlight," Nancy said.

Robin snorted. "What, to drink disgusting beer at my house? You're not a Boy Scout, Nance. You don't have to always be prepared."

That might have been true, but that didn't change the fact that the yawning blackness of the covered bridge was sending electric shocks of foreboding up Nancy's spine, and that the whole situation would have been way, *way* more palatable with a flashlight in her hand. Or, hell, a fucking *gun*. But the excited momentum that had spurred Nancy all the way out here had not faded yet. There was no universe, Upside Down or otherwise, that would allow Nancy Wheeler to retreat to her car and drive back to civilization.

The *crunch* of gravel under Nancy's and Robin's sneakers transitioned to a more hollow, duller *thunk* as they stepped onto the wooden slats of the bridge. "Joey?" Robin called again, her voice now echoing off the walls and the ceiling. "It's Robin. And Nancy. Sorry, I know you didn't say it was okay if I brought a friend, but Nancy's cool, I swear—"

"*Ow,*" Nancy said as Robin landed a prompting elbow in her ribs. "Uh… yeah. Hey, Joey. Robin's right, I—I'm cool."

Understandably, this anemic assurance did not materialize Joey out of the darkness. The girls paced the length of the bridge without coming across anything more than a couple of buzzing mosquitoes.

"I don't think he's here," Robin said, as they emerged into the wide night on the other side, blinking in the moonlight.

"Joey!" Nancy called one more time, trying not to sound as desperate as she felt.

"I can't believe it," Robin said. "Stood up by Joey Taft. This is my lowest moment."

"Why would he call you and then not show?" Nancy asked. "He really sounded freaked. It doesn't make sense."

"Could be a prank?"

"Weird prank."

"Who knows what enigmatic oddities lurk in the minds of band kids, Nancy?" Robin said. "I *am* one and I don't know. Maybe someone dared him—the wind section are all real dicks this year. They've got delusions of grandeur or something."

Nancy tapped an urgent hand against Robin's shoulder. "Shh."

"You should have heard this freshman clarinet. Danielle? She thought she was going to just walk in and take first chair on her *first day*. It was, frankly, beyond the realms of comprehension. Vickie *earned* that spot fair and square—"

Shoulder taps weren't working. Nancy resorted to grabbing both of Robin's arms, forcing her to meet Nancy's eyes. "Robin! *Shh!"*

Robin's jaw clacked shut.

"*Listen,*" Nancy whispered.

At first, the only noises that marred the dark summertime silence were the chirping of crickets and the bubbling of the stream below. Nancy strained her ears, searching, searching—

There.

The sound was faint but unmistakable. Water sloshing, disturbing the rhythmic babble of the stream below. It caught Nancy's attention like a fishing line, and her head snapped around toward the source—the stream bank beneath their feet.

There was someone below them. Someone who hadn't answered when Nancy and Robin had called out.

Nancy's scalp tingled. "Come on," she said, and then she was racing back across the bridge, the wooden slats thudding and rattling with her pounding footsteps.

"You know how I am with running," Robin protested, but she had already taken off as well, sprinting to catch up.

Nancy burst out the other side of the covered bridge at full speed, humid air sinking heavy in her lungs. She was going so fast that she actually skidded when she tried to slow, scanning the darkness for any sign of whoever had been lurking below. Robin stumbled as she swerved to avoid Nancy, catching her balance on the hood of the parked station wagon.

"Where are they?" Robin asked, pushing herself back upright. "Do you see them?"

"I…" But no matter how hard Nancy searched their surroundings, no matter how hard she cursed herself for not bringing her flashlight, there was no sign of their mystery visitor. "No."

"What the *hell*?" Robin exhaled, sounding winded. She paced to the edge of the road where the streambed rose to meet it, clutching at her ribs.

Nancy let out a frustrated breath. "What weird kind of prank—"

"It's not a prank."

It wasn't the conviction of Robin's words that had Nancy drawing up short. It was the strangled panic in her voice. "What do you mean? Robin?"

But Robin was already gone, scrabbling down the embankment toward the water. Nancy followed, slipping and sliding on the wet rocks as she went. "Robin!" She lost her balance, pitching sideways and landing on her hip in the sucking mud. "Ugh." Nancy yanked her hands free, wincing at the wet sound they made as the stream bank released them, and did her best to wipe them on her jeans.

There was a scrap of paper half-buried in the muck just a few inches in front of her. Nancy almost disregarded it as she shoved herself to her feet—just a piece of trash—but as she turned her eyes away, a warning bell went off in the back of her mind. It was the same alarm she'd heard when the report of strange rats had crossed the news desk at *The Hawkins Post*. The same alarm that had blared in her ears as Wayne Munson had told her the story of Victor Creel. *There's something here. Look harder*.

Nancy plucked the paper out of the muck. In the faint light of the moon, she could make out a series of scrawled numbers. She frowned, turning the paper over to check the back—blank—and then glanced up at Robin. "This is weird."

But Robin wasn't listening. She had dropped to her knees in the mud, hunching over something on the ground. It was a large, irregular shape, slumped in a pile—a heap of rags or a bag of trash or an animal, or—

A pale hand lay outflung from the pile. There was something caked beneath the fingernails, too crimson to ever be mistaken for mud. A baggy sleeve hung loose around the wrist, torn and soiled in spots—but unmistakably Hawkins High hunter green. *A graduation robe.* Nancy didn't want to look. But Robin's muttered litany of "Oh my God oh my God oh my God oh my God" was already swimming in her ears, and Nancy knew all too well at this point that looking away didn't change anything.

She forced herself to pace forward. Forced herself to keep her eyes pinned on that hand. The ragged nails, the familiar sleeve—

And the wide, dead eyes of Joey Taft.

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Chapter Seven

Robin was a vibrating ball of nervous energy at Nancy's side. Nancy could almost *hear* the anxiety radiating off her. She could *definitely* hear the *clink-clink* of Robin's rings as she twisted her fingers over and under and over one another again.

"I don't think I'll ever get used to this," Robin said, watching as two men in M.P.-emblazoned helmets drew a sheet over Joey's pale face. *Clink-clink* went Robin's rings. She'd washed her hands at the convenience store where they'd called the police, but there was still blood caked under her fingernails. "Do you ever get used to this?"

There was already blood seeping through the stark white sheet, seeping from the ruin of gunshots in his chest. Nancy's stomach turned. "No."

"I don't think I'll ever get used to this," Robin whispered again, a reassurance to herself. Nancy leaned her shoulder against Robin's briefly, just long enough to let her know that she understood.

"You ladies holding up all right?" Chief Powell asked as he approached, pacing out of the blinding glare of the unending headlights. Nancy had lost count of the number of cars at the scene after the unmarked black sedans started to show up in droves. She was starting to forget whether this was a bridge or a parking lot.

The chief's hat was slung low on his forehead, the shadow blocking out his eyes, but nothing could mask the downtrodden slump of his shoulders.

"We're okay," Nancy said. "But do you know how much longer we're going to have to stay?"

"That's up to Captain Rose. But I don't imagine we'll have to keep you here too much later."

“Is there—Do we know what happened to him?” Robin asked. “Aside from, you know.” She made a finger-gun gesture, and then looked as though she instantly regretted it. “Sorry. But, like…is there any clue of *who* happened to him?”

“If there was, I wouldn’t exactly be at liberty to disclose,” Chief Powell replied, stern as ever.

“It didn’t look like…what happened to Fred,” Nancy said, more to Robin than to the chief. “Or Chrissy or Patrick. Right?”

This wasn’t Vecna, was what she was saying without actually saying it. Because Joey’s body might have been a wreck, but that was on account of the ragged bullet holes that had been punched into him. And Vecna might deal in a lot of stuff, but firearms generally didn’t make his roster.

Confirming Nancy’s suspicions, Robin shook her head. “No. No… Satanic sacrifices here.” *Definitely not Vecna.*

“And if I start hearing mutterings in *that* direction,” Chief Powell cut in, “then I’ll know who lit that fire. My advice, ladies? Keep your mouths shut about what you’ve seen here tonight. Unless you’re looking to push Hawkins over the edge.”

A slow ripple of sick disappointment spread through Nancy. *Not Vecna.* It was like she was back in the funeral home all over again. This was nothing more than another dead end.

But it doesn’t have to be.

The thought lit a spark inside of her, one that flitted up her spine, electrifying her as it went. Because that was right—Joey’s death might not have been Vecna’s work, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t worth looking into.

“If there’s one thing I know how to do, Chief Powell,” Nancy said, “it’s keep my mouth shut.”

“Hmph.” Somewhere under his hat, the chief was pinning her with the world’s most unimpressed stare. For a second, Nancy had the insane thought that he *knew,* somehow, about the muddy scrap of paper in her pocket—the paper she still hadn’t shown to anyone, not even Robin.

Now’s your chance, the more pragmatic side of Nancy’s brain whispered. *If you wait any longer, it’ll be suspicious. Show him the*

numbers. Tell him where you found them.

She stuffed her hand into her pocket, her fingertips brushing the paper. But the second they made contact, that electric thrill rushed through her again, the one that raised the hair on the back of her neck. The one that whispered, *This means something.*

Nancy kept the paper stashed safely away. Because, she told herself, with everything else going on, Hawkins PD had more than enough to deal with. And what were they going to do with a strange string of numbers, anyway? It's not like they had the time to sit around trying to decode them. It's not like they had the *resources*. It was better if she held on to it. Just for now. It was better to waste her own time puzzling this out than the police's.

And the fact that you've been dying for a problem to solve has absolutely nothing to do with this?

It wasn't fair, but that question came to her in Jonathan's voice. Luckily, Nancy was saved from scrabbling for an answer by the arrival of the U.S. Army's very own Captain Rose.

He was a burly man in his late thirties, a little on the shorter side, but with the kind of cultivated handsomeness that sometimes was a little uncomfortable to look at. It was easy to imagine every exhausting, labor-intensive minute he spent in front of the mirror before heading out the front door every morning. Nancy had met him once or twice through *The Hawkins Post*. He wasn't one of the everyday uniforms camped out in the corner of the newsroom; he was the man those uniforms answered to.

"Heck of an evening you girls are having," he said, clapping a hand on Chief Powell's shoulder as he walked up. The chief didn't react much to the familiar gesture, but Nancy thought she could see the corner of his mouth twitch downward.

Nancy did her best to match Rose's easy charm. "That's for sure."

"The chief here says you were friends with the deceased?"

"With *Joey,*" Robin rasped.

"I can't believe it." Nancy shook her head. "*Joey.* Who'd want to hurt Joey?"

“That’s what we’re going to figure out,” Captain Rose reassured them. “You girls—you’ve been through enough this year without piling *this* on top of it. So I’m going to run through these questions as fast as possible, and we’ll be able to get you on your way before your parents miss you. Sound good?”

Nancy smiled, oozing as much saccharine gratitude as she could muster. “Yes, sir.”

“Yes, uh, sir,” Robin echoed a split second after.

“Wonderful. Now. Why don’t you tell me what you were doing out here in the middle of the night?”

“*Well*,” Nancy said, cutting Robin off before she could get out the first word, “Captain. It’s a little—ugh, we just don’t want to get in trouble.”

“There’s only one mystery I’m interested in investigating here tonight, Miss…” Captain Rose trailed off, looking to Chief Powell.

“Wheeler,” the chief grated out.

“Miss Wheeler. And unless you’re responsible for *that*, I think we can agree to look the other way for more minor offenses.”

“Then—if you’re *sure*…. We were meeting Joey here tonight because… he wanted us to buy him some beer.”

Captain Rose cocked his perfect head to the side. “Beer?”

“Yeah.” Nancy sighed. “He said he was going to a party later, and he wanted to bring a six-pack.”

“He was paying you to do this?”

“Barely anything,” Robin piped up, and Nancy felt some tension in her shoulders unspool. “Market price. For a couple of Old Styles. Honestly, we weren’t even gonna do it at all, but Joey’s not exactly the kind of guy who gets invited to a ton of parties, you know? And if he had an in, we didn’t want to blow it for him.”

“We felt sorry for him,” Nancy said. “So we got him the beer.”

“How generous,” Chief Powell drawled.

“Where did you pick it up?” Rose asked.

“To be honest? I took it from my dad,” Nancy said. “It’s still in the back of my car. You can check.”

Rose's eyes slid to a point somewhere over Nancy's shoulder. When she turned to follow, she saw that there was already a uniformed soldier shining a flashlight through the back window of her station wagon. The man waved an arm at Rose, who turned his shiny smile back to Nancy. "Your honesty is appreciated, Miss Wheeler. I think we can let your little…indiscretion go, just this once."

"You're not going to tell my parents?"

"Just this once," Captain Rose repeated. "Consider it a thank-you for being so helpful."

Chief Powell tilted the brim of his hat up with one finger, and Nancy tried not to fidget under the sharpness of his gaze. "Before you ladies found Joey," he said, "did you hear anything? See anything? That might be useful to us in our investigation?"

The scrap of paper burned a guilty hole in Nancy's pocket. "No," she said. "I'm really sorry."

Chief Powell frowned. "Don't be. Whoever did this—they're a dangerous son of a bitch."

Captain Rose clapped his hands together, punctuation at the end of the interview. "On that upbeat note, I think it's past time for you girls to be heading on home. Your folks must be worried about you."

"Thank you, Captain Rose," Nancy said. "If there's anything else we can do to help—"

"You'll be my first call," Rose said. "And in the meantime, I'd tell you not to leave town, but." He didn't trail off or do anything to imply the end of the sentence. It was punctuated by nothing but a period and a square-toothed smile.

Nancy gave him her best in return. "Ha ha," she recited dutifully.

"You all get home," Chief Powell said. "And drive safe. Someone'll be in touch if they need to follow up."

Nancy nodded and nudged Robin's shoulder with her own, urging her to leave while they had the grace of being dismissed. They turned to go—

"Oh—one more thing?"

Nancy fought back the urge to reach for her pocket as she glanced back over her shoulder at Captain Rose. His smile hadn't shifted a millimeter. If the electrical grid in Hawkins failed, they could use the kilowattage he was generating as a backup. "You ladies go to Hawkins High, right?" he asked. "Class of '86?"

Nancy nodded. "That's right."

"Go—go Tigers," Robin stammered.

"Then…congratulations," Rose said. "Graduation is no small achievement."

"Especially in this town," Robin blurted before Nancy landed a covert elbow in her ribs.

"Thank you, sir." Nancy smiled. "We appreciate it." And before Captain Rose could say anything else—anything that might make Robin explode with repressed anxiety—she grabbed Robin by the elbow, towed her back to the car, and bundled her into the passenger seat, slamming the car door closed on Robin's confused expression.

Her heart was playing an intense solo on her eardrums as she slid behind the wheel. Somewhere to her right, Robin was turning her pale, shell-shocked face toward her, blinking under the flashing red-and-blue police lights. "Nancy?"

"Not yet." Nancy cranked the key in the ignition, making sure to shoot one last sunny smile in the rearview for the benefit of the still-waving Captain Rose. Then she was pulling out onto the road, driving away at a careful and assiduous two miles below the speed limit.

It wasn't until she'd put five minutes of solid, strained asphalt between the station wagon and the crime scene that Nancy let herself really breathe again. "Okay," she said. "You can ask."

"What the *hell*, Nancy?" The words exploded out of Robin, ricocheting against the windows and the ceiling. "What was that all about? Why were we lying to the cops?"

Nancy dug into her pocket, producing the muddy scrap of paper and handing it over. "This is why."

Robin took it from her, and Nancy noticed Robin's hands were still shaking. "This? This…piece of trash?"

Nancy gripped the steering wheel harder. "Look at it—seriously, *look* at it."

Holding it up to the window, Robin squinted at the paper in the moonlight. "Numbers?"

"A bunch of them. Do you think that's Joey's handwriting?"

"I mean, maybe? It could be? Wait—holy shit, *Nancy*. Did you find this, like, *at* the crime scene?"

Nancy shrugged. "It was in the mud."

"The mud next to Joey. Is this a *clue*?"

Nancy's mouth tightened. *This was a mistake. I shouldn't have told her.* "I don't know."

"And you just took it."

To Nancy's surprise, she couldn't detect even the slightest hint of judgment in Robin's voice. Casting a quick glance over, she saw that Robin was now inspecting the paper with meticulous curiosity, turning it over in her hands the same way Nancy had when she'd first come across it.

Something in Nancy's shoulders—a tightness she hadn't even been aware she was carrying—loosened. "Yeah. I mean. He was going to give it to us, right? To you? Why else would he have brought it?"

The laugh that ripped out of Robin had more than an edge of hysteria to it. "Sure! That makes as much sense as anything else. Why *not* bring a string of ominous, mysterious numbers to a middle-of-the-night meeting with a girl you've barely said more than 'Empty your spit valve' to in *four freaking years*?*"*

Nancy nodded, eyes glued to the road. "Exactly. That's what I'm thinking."

"What *are* you thinking, Nance? Like, seriously, what are you thinking? And please know I ask that with all the good intentions in the world, but there were, like, two obvious supervisory organizations—and probably at least three *non*obvious ones—back there that you could have handed that piece of paper to, and you didn't."

“I was thinking…” *That this was her chance to* do *something that wasn’t just sitting around, waiting for Vecna to ring the dinner bell. That she’d maybe go insane without a mystery to solve. That this was the lifeline.* “I was thinking that Joey didn’t go to those guys either. No military, no cops. He went to *you*. He went to *us*. This is something, Robin. Something big.” An electric hum crawled up the back of her neck. Despite the late hour, she felt *awake*, and she realized there was a twisted smile fighting its way onto her face. “And whatever it is? We’re going to drag it out into the light.”

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Chapter Eight

It was maybe only ten yards from the conference table in *The Hawkins Post*'s newsroom to the office kitchen, but as someone whose summer internship duties had kept her practically chained to the Mr. Coffee, Nancy knew just how infinite those yards could feel. Which meant that now, every time she slid into her very own chair at the newsroom table, she tried to appreciate it as much as possible. For such a short distance, it had been a long walk. It felt *good* to sit down.

But appreciation was a little harder to come by this morning. Nancy was still feeling the weight of last night's events behind her eyes. After she'd dropped Robin off back at her house, Nancy had returned home to find her entire family asleep. There had been no one to talk to about what had happened to Joey—and maybe that was a good thing, because Nancy's excuses about the state of her clothing (stained with extradimensional slime, ripped by monstrous claws, singed by Molotov cocktails) were *way* past the point of wearing thin. If her mother had seen the bloodstains on her cuffs, then Nancy would have found herself under lock and key right up until it was time to ship off to Emerson.

Even with that bullet dodged, though, Nancy'd had a difficult time getting her mind to stop churning. She'd lain in bed, staring at the muddy scrap of paper, willing the numbers to make sense until they'd started swimming before her eyes. She wasn't sure when she'd fallen asleep—her light had still been on when her alarm had blared at seven the following morning, which meant that she must have passed out between one thought and the next.

Now, crammed into the newsroom with the other journalists of *The Hawkins Post,* Nancy was fighting to keep her eyes open. For the first time, she found herself thinking longingly of making that ten-yard trek to the Mr. Coffee.

"…says they're even popping up around the seventh hole, way on the other side of the course."

Instead, she was doomed to pinching herself awake while Marty Danvers finished up his five-minute-long pitch on the dandelion invasion overtaking the Samuel Hawkins Golf Course.

A lot had changed since Nancy's internship the year before. For one thing, the paper's leadership had experienced the kind of foundation-shattering shake-up that could only be the result of half the editorial staff collapsing into goo and becoming subsumed into a giant meat-spider. And for another, in recent months, another link or two had been added to what remained of the paper's chain of command.

These days, every story that was pitched had to filter through Corporal Young, a stern-faced military communications specialist, before it made it up onto the newsboard. As a result of this new chain of command, Young had commandeered a seat in the corner of the newsroom. From here, she silently observed each and every pitch meeting. One grim shake of her head would send even the most innocuous story to the graveyard. And if a journalist decided to push back, then they would soon find themselves visited by a *large* pair of soldiers armed with AR-15s and forceful lectures regarding the importance of a *responsible and civic-minded press.*

Still, that didn't stop Nancy from contemplating risking it all every time one of her innocent stories was nixed by Corporal Young and her wordless veto. The only thing that really kept her from blowing the lid off of the whole Vecna situation in front of the entire newsroom was the fact that, military oversight or not, if there were any signs of Vecna or the Mind Flayer or whatever new hellish Demogorgon incarnation was getting cooked up on the other side of the Rift, *The Hawkins Post* would be one of the first places to hear about it. It didn't matter whether they'd be allowed

to run the story—Nancy would be taking that information to people who would actually be able to *do* something with it.

And if that meant she had to bite her tongue? Well. She was getting better at that every day.

"I'll tell you, have you ever tried to play through a damn flower patch? You might as well dig a hole to China with your nine-iron!"

Probably.

At least she wasn't the only person tuning out Marty's rambling. At the front of the room, recently coronated editor in chief Sean Pullman had the kind of hazy sheen in his eyes that said he was using this time to mentally make a grocery list.

"What do you think?" Marty asked. As if he were flipping a switch, Sean was dialed back in, all thoughts of milk, eggs, or ground beef banished.

"It sure is a story, Marty," he said. "I'm just not sure it's strong enough to carry much weight."

"The country club's up in arms over it," Marty protested. "What with half the grounds already…appropriated—"

There was a creak from the corner of the room. Corporal Young shifted in her chair. Behind his Coke-bottle glasses, Sean's gaze flicked in her direction, just briefly—but long enough to send Marty's mouth snapping shut. And for good reason. One of the first things that the military had done, upon rolling into Hawkins back in March, was march an industrial-strength fence across the cultivated green Hawkins Golf Course, blocking the area off to make way for a city of mysterious and extremely off-limits tents. Nancy personally thought that the members of the Hawkins Country Club—including her father—should be happy that they were left any of their grounds at all. But any attempts to explain that to men like Marty Danvers or Ted Wheeler fell on deaf ears.

"I think," Sean said, carefully *not* looking at Corporal Young, "that it's a story worth looking into. From the right angle."

"Right angle," Marty echoed, nodding enthusiastically.

“The *ecological* angle,” Sean said. “Talk to…some of the teachers over at the school. Science teachers. Or the ladies at the Corner Street Garden Center. One of them might be able to give you a few quotes.”

“Or the name of a good weed killer,” quipped one of the features editors from somewhere behind his overflowing mustache. The room erupted in chuckles, and Marty happily joined in, taking the ribbing in stride. It was an outsize reaction for what didn’t even really qualify as a joke, but Corporal Young was still a silent and ominously watchful presence in her corner, and anything to break that tension was more than welcome. And with that rickety situation dealt with, Sean turned to add Marty’s “Dandelion Invasion” story to the news board, and the rest of the meeting moved quickly from there. By this point, several months into the military oversight of *The Post*, the electric fence around what would and wouldn’t pass muster was well known, which meant that most of the pitches flowed through without incident.

It also meant the stories that joined Marty’s on the board were so inoffensive that Nancy circled right back around to being offended again. *The Post* had never been a hard-hitting newspaper, but there was a difference between missing a few teeth and being toothless, and Nancy wasn’t about to let herself starve.

She also wasn’t an idiot, which was why she waited until the pitch meeting was wrapped, the newsroom had cleared, and Marty Danvers had packed off to go interview his golfing buddies over a martini or four before she made her move. There was a moment after every meeting when Corporal Young tucked herself into a corner, picked up her phone, and quietly debriefed her supervisor on the paper’s mundane daily activities. As soon as Nancy saw the corporal dial the first few numbers, she slipped into Sean’s office and shut the door.

She found Sean standing behind his desk, in the middle of spreading out the galley proof of the next day’s front page. He glanced up as she entered. “Wheeler?” His eyes flicked to the closed door behind her. “Should I be worried?”

Nancy squared off with him across the desk. He straightened to face her, crossing his arms over his chest. Sean wasn't a tall man, but he was sturdy—and, most important, he was decent. As the former editorials editor, he was one of the only *Post* employees who'd never clicked with the boys' club that Tom Holloway had formed from the rest of the newsroom. That might have been why he'd survived the "mall fire" that had wiped out a good chunk of the paper's roster, and consequently why he'd landed in the top editor's chair. And considering the circumstances, he wasn't doing a terrible job.

Nancy hoped that was a trend that was going to survive this conversation.

"No, you don't have to be worried."

"Then why am I?"

"Just listen." Nancy stepped toward him as she talked, keeping her voice low. "A kid died last night. Did you hear about this?"

Behind Sean's glasses, the lines around his eyes deepened. "I did."

"His name was Joey Taft."

"I know." Sean let the galley slip from his fingers. It collapsed to his desk in a mess of folds. Nancy could already spot two typos and an unwanted Oxford comma. "Phil Callahan was talking about it at the diner this morning. That guy can't keep his mouth shut."

"I want to do a story on it."

"A story on"—Sean frowned—"the kid's death?"

Nancy leaned in, hands planted on Sean's desk. "On his *murder.*"

There was a long beat as Sean looked at her, brown eyes steady. "What makes you think it was a murder?"

"Because Phil Callahan was worked up enough to still be talking about it the next day."

Sean still hadn't blinked. "Callahan'll talk about anything. You know that."

Nancy sighed. "Because—because I was there, Sean. I was there last night."

The discarded galley crinkled as Sean's fingers flexed against it. "You saw Joey."

"I *found* him."

"*Found him*—What the hell were you doing all the way out on the edge of town in the middle of the night, Wheeler?"

Callahan really can't *keep his mouth shut,* Nancy thought. "Joey's the only one who could've answered that question," she told him. "He wanted to talk. He never got the chance to. All I can tell you is that nobody whose chest looks like—like his chest looked died by accident." Something flickered in Sean's level gaze—even though he was trying to project a hard-ass facade, her words had found a mark. "Something happened to him. Something bad. I want to find out what it was."

"I'm—" Sean slid his glasses off his nose, rubbing at his forehead with his free hand. "Jesus. I'm sorry, Wheeler. Nancy. I'm sorry for what happened to your friend. I'm sorry you had to see him like that." A strangled laugh escaped him. "I'm sorry for everything you and your classmates have been through these last couple years."

Somewhere in the back of her mind, Higgins was droning through a roll call of dead students. *Barbara Holland*.

"I want to find out what happened to Joey, Sean," Nancy said.

"The cops'll figure it out. Don't worry."

"The cops can't do anything," she said. "And they know it. They've got too much on their plates, and there aren't enough of them to go around. That's why Callahan's spending the morning gossiping at the diner instead of actually investigating. But just because they can't doesn't mean *we* can't."

Sean's eyebrows shot toward his hairline. "*We?*"

"*The Hawkins Post*." Nancy's voice dropped even lower. "There's something going on here. I know it. Joey was mixed up in something that scared the hell out of him. It got him killed. *We could figure out what it was*. Think about what that would mean for this town. You said it yourself—we've been through so much. Chemical leaks, earthquakes, fires. They're

tragedies—without answers. But ‘Who killed Joey Taft?’ *has* an answer. We could find that answer. We could solve this thing. What do you think?”

She was breathing hard by the time she stopped talking, but Sean’s expression hadn’t shifted. The only hint of whatever was going on inside his head was the vein jumping in his temple.

“I think,” he finally said, “that Georgia Miller is in town.”

It was such a non sequitur that it ground Nancy to a complete halt. “What?”

“Georgia Miller,” Sean said again. “Hawkins’s own. Founder of Hearth & Home, the nonprofit that’s going to save us all.”

“I guess,” Nancy said, still floundering. “But Joey—”

“*She’s* a story,” Sean said, cutting her off. “One that’ll run, even. And if I’m remembering right, she and your mom were thick as thieves when they were in high school. I bet, if you asked, she’d let you write a profile on her.”

The disorientation from Sean’s conversational left turn was wearing off, and a pit of disappointment was growing in Nancy’s stomach. “You don’t want me to look into Joey.”

“Wheeler.” Sean shoved his glasses back onto his face and stepped out from behind his desk. “What I *want* isn’t really a factor here, and you know that.”

“You won’t even try to run it?” Nancy asked.

Sean maneuvered around Nancy, reaching for the door handle behind her.

Nancy moved to block him. “They can’t stop you from printing the papers, Sean. They can’t stop you from distributing them.”

“They can’t,” Sean said, and finally his tone was just as low and fervent as hers. “But that’s the kind of shot you can only take once. And unless you can call it one hundred percent, then pulling the trigger is the same as throwing it away. Are you at one hundred percent, Wheeler?”

Of course, was Nancy’s instinctive first response, but she forced herself to bite back the words. Because what did she *really* have? A hunch, the memory of Joey’s terrified voice, and a string of numbers she couldn’t

decipher. Not exactly the rock-solid foundation for an exposé. Not exactly one hundred percent.

She clenched her jaw, which was a good-enough answer for Sean. This time she didn't try to hinder him as he reached for the door and opened it. The hubbub of the *Post* bullpen filtered in, wrapping around Nancy and dulling the sharp edges of dismay that had dug into her chest.

At the far side of the bullpen, the communications officer had wrapped up her phone call and was watching the editor's office—watching Nancy and Sean—with hawklike intensity. Again, Sean resolutely did not look in her direction as he ushered Nancy out.

"Georgia Miller," he said, his voice at its typical volume. "H&H. It's a good pitch, Wheeler. I want a thousand words by Tuesday. That sound doable?"

Corporal Young's eyes slid away. That story, at least, was innocent enough—*boring enough*—to have passed muster.

"Whatever you say," Nancy mumbled, but Sean was already retreating into his office before she got the last word out, shutting the door between them with a resolute *clunk* and leaving Nancy staring at nothing but smooth, lacquered wood—a sight that said, very clearly, *Dead end.*

She took a deep breath and forced herself to turn around, preparing to trudge her way back to her desk—and stopped.

"You won't even try to run it?"

That's what she'd asked Sean. "*You won't even try to run it?*" There were only two answers: *yes* or *no*. It was the kind of question that interviewers were taught to avoid. Boring. Binary.

And for a binary question…Sean hadn't said no.

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Chapter Nine

"If we're going to do, like, a full murder mystery investigation," Robin said, "then we need a better setup. I think that this is what experts call 'untenable.' "

She and Nancy were once again camping out on the roof outside of Robin's bedroom. As if the weather was trying to voice its agreement, a gust of wind rushed past them, knocking over the cup of water that Nancy had placed next to her feet. She winced as her socks were soaked.

"We can't do my house," Nancy said, setting the cup upright once again. "My mom pokes into everything, and Mike's already taken over the basement."

"There's gotta be one spot in this stupid town big enough for us to put together a—I don't know. What do you call it. Command center? War room?"

"Mission control," Nancy said.

Robin waved her hands vaguely through the air. "Room-with-a-conspiracy-board. That's what we need."

"Well, until one of those falls into our laps," Nancy said, "we'll have to make this work." She twisted around in her lawn chair so that she was facing Robin across the armrest. "I was trying to figure out where to start on the whole Joey thing. Putting together the biggest questions we have right now. Who killed him, obviously. And why."

Robin cocked her head to the side. "Those are probably the headliners, sure."

"Right. But there's also—"

"Why the hell was he so paranoid at graduation?"

It was like Robin had read her mind. Nancy couldn't fight her grin. "Exactly."

"We could talk to his friends," Robin offered. "They might know what was up with him."

Nancy's mouth twisted. "You think?"

"You don't?"

Nancy sighed, very aware of the fact that what she was about to say was not going to land well. "I'm just thinking—that when he was in trouble. He called *you*."

Robin's face went blank for a split second. "What's wrong with me?"

Shit. "Nothing. Nothing!" Nancy scrambled to smooth over the moment. "But he had friends, right? And you—you weren't one of them." This wasn't going well. "Not because of—just because you weren't close. And even so, you were the person he reached out to first. You were the person he was going to talk to."

"And I'm…not usually anyone's first call," Robin said slowly. Nancy opened her mouth to protest, but Robin cut her off. "It's fine. Maybe you're right. Except—I was yours, wasn't I?"

Nancy blinked. "Huh?"

"Um, well, I couldn't help but notice," Robin said, not bothering to cover the sarcasm that crept into her voice, "but we seem to be short two lovelorn macho idiots on this rooftop."

"They're not lovelorn."

"Weird thing to say about your boyfriend."

"*I wasn't talking about—*" Nancy caught herself. Robin was just trying to goad her. She would not be goaded. She was ungoadable. "I just didn't think this would really be of interest to Steve and Jonathan."

"You didn't think that *investigating a murder* would be 'of interest'?"

"That's what I said."

"Nancy." Robin rubbed her temples. "Did you or did you not once drag Jonathan along on a hunt for rats?"

This entire conversation was spiraling out of Nancy's control. "They were weird rats. If you remember, they turned into a meat spider."

“You’re evading the question.”

Nancy flashed Robin a bright smile. “Am I?”

Robin flung her arms into the air. “Oh my God, *Nance*. Can you quit it with the games? This isn’t some high-stakes political interview, all right? You’re not Edward R. Murrow! If you don’t want to answer me then that’s totally fine, but at least just come on and tell me to freaking shut up instead of whatever the hell this is!”

Nancy gave in. “You were my first call. I haven’t…told Steve or Jonathan what we’re up to.”

Robin’s nod was careful. “Do you…wanna say why?”

“Because—*ugh*.” Nancy rolled her head against the back of her chair, staring up at the cloudless summer sky. “Because things with me and Steve are *weird* right now. And I know he’s your friend, and I know it’s putting you in an awkward situation when I say *please* don’t tell him this, but—I’m avoiding him.”

Robin cocked her head. “Okay.”

“Does that—make things weird for you?”

“Probably,” Robin said, shrugging. “But to be perfectly honest with you, Nancy, it was way weirder with you not actually saying that out loud. Having to do all the guessing and the doubting and the wondering—that’s a lot of energy to be putting into a relationship that I’m not even a part of.”

Nancy smiled. “Touché.”

“Doesn’t explain the Jonathan thing, though.”

Something in Nancy’s stomach twisted. She ran a hand through her hair, tugging at the roots. “Jonathan…”

“We just might not find him tonight.”

Nancy shook off that memory. But in the vacuum it left, another swarmed in to fill the void. Standing with Jonathan in the darkroom at *The Hawkins Post*, a rubber rat on the floor at her feet. Jonathan’s imploring eyes.

“It’s just some silly story.”

She shrank back from the echo of his words, flinching right into two months ago, into the hours after Jonathan, Will, Mike, and Eleven had

rolled back into town after their California misadventure. She could still feel the percussive impact of a hammer on a two-by-four as she and Jonathan did their best to turn Hopper's cabin into something halfway livable. She could see that same imploring look fill Jonathan's eyes as he hesitantly turned toward her.

"Hey…are we okay?"

The memories welled up around her, walling off the world. Was there a way to convey to Robin just how claustrophobic they made her feel? How helpless? How frustrated?

Robin was the one who found a way, ultimately. She was already watching her when Nancy met her eyes. "Complicated?" she asked.

Exactly. Yes. "Complicated," Nancy agreed.

"I hate complicated," Robin muttered. Then she slapped both hands down on her knees, shoving to her feet. "Fine. You and me. Lady detectives. Let's crack this case wide open."

Robin didn't give herself enough credit for the power of her personality. It only took her a couple of minutes on the phone before she had convinced three of Joey's friends to meet with them at Lakeview Bakery the next day. When Nancy and Robin arrived at the bakery, they found the three members of the Hawkins High drum line already seated around a small table, staring bleakly into the depths of their coffee cups.

Greetings and introductions were somber at best. Joey's death had hit his friends hard.

"I just can't believe it," whispered Shirley Romano (cymbals). Her eyes were puffy, red, and tired, and she stared at Nancy as if she were looking straight through her. Her unglazed cake doughnut sat untouched on a plate in front of her.

"Joey?" Corey Kellum (snare) shook his head. He was sitting on his hands so no one else could see how badly they were shaking. "Why Joey?"

"Who the hell would do that?" bit out Dennis Baker (tenor drums), who seemed to have bypassed the grief of his friends and jumped straight to rage.

“On—on graduation night too,” Shirley said. Her voice was starting to shake, the words thickening with another wave of tears.

“I know this all sucks,” Robin offered. “But me and Nancy, we’re trying to figure out why this happened to Joey. If there’s anything you can tell us __”

Dennis’s fist came down on the table, hard enough to send Shirley’s doughnut hopping from the plate to the floor. “*Fuck this town.”*

Corey glanced anxiously over his shoulder at the two or three other bakery patrons. “Dennis, keep it cool, man.”

“No fucking way,” Dennis said. “He *graduated*. He could have *left*. And instead—what, he ends up dead? Just like—like Patrick and Sammy and *everyone else*? *Fuck this town.*”

“Dennis—” Corey hissed again.

“No, it’s okay,” Nancy said. “He’s right. Fuck this town.”

Dennis nodded, jaw clenched, grimly satisfied by Nancy’s commiseration. “This whole place is bullshit. People are dropping like flies, left and right, and it’s like—nobody gives a shit. Like, people are saying, boo-hoo, so sad. But nobody *does* anything about it.”

“We are,” Robin said. Nancy glanced in her direction and saw that Robin’s eyes had gone strangely bright. Then Robin blinked, and the sheen vanished. “We’re trying to.”

Loretta, the bakery’s notoriously kindhearted owner, appeared at Shirley’s shoulder, dropping a fresh doughnut on her now-empty plate.

“But you’re not cops,” Dennis said as Shirley smiled her thanks up at Loretta and began to pick at her pastry. “You’re just kids. Like us. So…why do you wanna know about Joey? What is this even *for*?”

At Robin’s nod of encouragement, Nancy leaned forward, taking the lead. “That’s the thing,” she said. “We’re *not* kids anymore.”

“Why, because we graduated?” Dennis scoffed. “Because we got some stupid piece of paper and shook Horrible Higgins’s hand?”

“*Horrible Higgins*,” Nancy heard Robin echo to herself, probably stowing that away for later.

“Because of that, yeah,” Nancy said. “Also because we’re eighteen. But mostly because—because nobody goes through what we’ve all gone through and stays a kid, you know? Not for long. You heard that roll call that Higgins gave during his commencement address. That’s not normal. That doesn’t happen at other high schools. But in Hawkins…” She traced a finger through the crumbs on the table. “You’re right, Dennis. What happened to Joey shouldn’t have happened at all. It shouldn’t have happened to any of our friends. And because it did—because we know it *can*—we don’t get to be kids anymore.”

“That sucks,” Shirley whispered, but the tearfulness had evaporated from her voice. There was a little bit of anger burning in the back of her eyes now, a steel that hadn’t been there when Nancy and Robin had first walked in.

“Right?” Robin agreed. “I mean, come on. Did Alex P. Keaton ever have to deal with this kind of bullshit? Did Carol Seaver?”

“The police will look into what happened to Joey,” Nancy said. “But they won’t get far. They can’t. Not with all this…new red tape that they’re dealing with. Us, though—”

“Nancy’s pretty much the star reporter for *The Hawkins Post*,” Robin said, continuing before Nancy could protest or correct that statement, “and I’m really, really nosy. And even though I didn’t know Joey as well as you guys, I liked him.”

“We’re trying to figure out how Joey died—because we can and because other people can’t.” Nancy nodded once. “*That’s* what this is for.”

Dennis didn’t say anything. That had to be enough, because it seemed like it was all they were going to get.

“What do you wanna know?” Corey asked.

The budding headache in Nancy’s temples started to ease. “Anything you can tell us.”

Corey and Shirley exchanged a shrug. “There’s not much,” Corey said. “Not a lot that you wouldn’t already know.” He directed that toward Robin with a tilt of his head. “Joey was always kinda quiet, even with us. He was really good at trombone and…English?”

“Creative writing,” Shirley clarified.

“Not math?” Nancy asked.

Shirley laughed. “No way. If I hadn’t tutored him, he would have flunked algebra this year for *sure*.”

Nancy dug the ragged list of numbers out of her pocket and showed it to the other kids. “How about this? Does this look familiar to you?”

Corey frowned. “What is that? Just a bunch of numbers?”

“It looks like Joey’s handwriting…” Shirley said slowly.

Nancy could feel the spark of hope starting to fade inside her chest. “But you don’t know what it means.”

Around the table, three heads shook in unison.

“Joey was different lately,” Dennis offered, like an olive branch. “He started acting weird.”

“In the last few days?” Nancy asked. Whatever had killed Joey in the end hadn’t been Vecna, but that didn’t mean that she could completely forget Vecna’s timetable.

Still, she wasn’t surprised when Dennis shook his head. “Longer than that,” he said. “Weeks. He was jumpy. Kinda…paranoid. Like there were things hiding around every corner. He started dropping shit, like, it was super easy to startle him. It got so bad that he stopped showing up for class for a while, before Higgins warned him that he could fail out before graduation.”

“He wouldn’t hang out with us anymore,” Shirley said. “Not even when it was Corey’s birthday. If you caught him in the hallway, he’d barely even say two words to you, and then he’d just keep walking.”

“Weird,” Dennis said again.

“It wasn’t his fault,” Corey protested, more to his friends than to Nancy and Robin. “He had a lot going on. It’s crazy to think that he’d have been around as much as he was before.”

Nancy and Robin shared a look. “Before what?” Nancy asked.

Shirley winced, looking a little ashamed of herself. “Joey lived with his grandma,” she said. “His dad’s dead, and his mom is a travel nurse—she got stuck outside of Hawkins when the earthquake hit, and she hasn’t been

able to get back in past the quarantine zone. It was fine for a while. Joey and his grandma get along great—*got* along great." Her voice tightened as she corrected herself, but she coughed and forced herself to continue. "But then a…couple of weeks ago? A month ago? His grandma started to get sick."

"Something with her breathing, I dunno," Corey said. "Joey was taking care of her. *That's* why he wasn't around as much."

Maybe, Nancy thought. *But a sick grandparent doesn't explain why a kid would suddenly start jumping at shadows.*

She realized with a start that Dennis's eyes were pinned on her. His fury seemed to have been banked, even as Shirley's had blazed to life. Now all Nancy could see in his face was sadness—sadness, and a little *fear.*

"Whatever was going on with Joey," he said, "he was keeping it to himself. If there's anyone who can tell you what he was thinking these last couple weeks, it's his grandma. Talk to her."

"*Talk to her.*" It was phrased like an order, but Nancy could hear the plea shading his words. *Talk to her. Please. Figure it out.*

Before one of us is next.

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Chapter Ten

"But you're used to having your own space, sweetheart."

"I know, but you're not *supposed* to have space as a freshman. You're supposed to—"

"Be packed in like a bunch of sardines?"

"I think it's called socializing."

Mom wrinkled her nose at Nancy. It was the morning after Nancy and Robin's fraught meeting with Joey's friends, and Nancy and her mother were sitting side by side at the kitchen table, mugs of coffee growing cold in their hands. Between them lay a glossy folder with the words EMERSON REGISTRATION printed across the cover.

It had arrived inside a manila envelope that had, of course, been opened and inspected by the border guards as it crossed the quarantine's perimeter. Evidence of the military's tampering was obvious—whoever had leafed through this packet had been eating something with ketchup, and their thumbprints were all over the place, especially on pages that had *really* caught their interest. It seemed, for example, like the inspector was impressed by the beautiful exterior of the Charlesgate dorms, judging by the smear of rusty red across the black-and-white photo of the building.

"I guess if you're going to be *socializing* anywhere, this would be the spot," Mom said, squinting to make out some of the building's details beneath the splotched condiments. "It's pretty."

Nancy turned the page. "I've heard it's haunted."

"Oh, don't be silly." Mom took a sip of her cold coffee and grimaced. "You don't believe in that stuff."

Nancy studied the blocky exterior of 100 Beacon in lieu of admitting to her mother that she wouldn't rule anything out as impossible these days. "This looks nice."

Her mother leaned in closer, studying the page. "I wonder how close it is to where Georgia lives."

"Come on, Mom, it's not like we're going to be hanging out every weekend," Nancy said, laughing.

"I know, I know." Mom waved a manicured hand. "Can you blame me? My little girl, going off to the big city—"

"Mom."

"I'm just glad to know that there's going to be someone around for you to go to if you have any problems."

"I'll have Jonathan," Nancy said, trying to sound as soothing and supportive as she could without completely talking down to her mother. "I'll always be able to go to him."

"I know, but—" Mom shook her head, and Nancy was a little alarmed to realize that her mother was actually a little teary-eyed. "Sorry, sweetheart. This is a big, exciting moment for you, and I know I shouldn't say this, but it's a big moment for me too." She leaned her shoulder into Nancy's. "I'm just so proud of you."

Nancy felt the words wrap around her, warming her from the outside in. It was a safe feeling, beautiful and familiar. How many times had they sat in this kitchen, just the two of them, drinking coffee, talking about the world? How many more times would they get the chance to, before Nancy left for college and the universe moved on around them?

Tears stung at her eyes abruptly. She blinked them away. "Thanks, Mom."

There was a knock at the front door. Nancy shot her mother a confused glance. "Was someone coming over?"

"Oh—" Mom dabbed at her eyes, gathering herself. "Just Will. He and Mike were going to do—I don't know, some of their dice stuff today."

Which meant they were going to try to plot out a way for Mike to sneak out to see Eleven.

Nancy left her mom to salvage what remained of her mascara and went to unlock the front door. But it wasn't just Will she found when she opened it.

"Hey," Jonathan said, smiling at her over his brother's shoulder.

"I didn't know you were coming!" Nancy exclaimed.

"Felt like it'd been a while since we'd seen each other," Jonathan told her. "So I figured I'd give Will a ride."

Will—caught between the two of them, and looking a little uneasy with it—fidgeted on the front stoop. "Uh," he said. "Can I—"

"Mike's downstairs," Nancy said. Will gave her a little smile and slipped past her, making a beeline for the kitchen. Behind her, she could hear him politely greeting her mom, turning down the offer of a Tab, and then making his escape down the basement stairs.

"I heard what you were working on," Jonathan said into the wake of Will's speedy departure.

He'd heard about Joey? Panic crashed through Nancy, quickly followed by guilt. Confusion brought up the rear, bringing the whole sequence of emotions to a troubling conclusion. Of course he'd heard about Joey, everyone had heard what happened to Joey. But how did he know that she was investigating his death? And why was she panicking? Why did it feel like such a big deal if he found out?

She opened her mouth to babble something, to say that she was sorry for not telling him before—but despite the fact that there was an apology in her head all lined up and ready to deploy, she was finding that she had to actively *will* herself to mean it. Every time she tried to force the words out, what she heard instead was Jonathan's quiet voice asking, *Are we okay?*

"I think it's great," Jonathan said before any of this mess could make its way out of Nancy's tortured psyche and into the world. "Georgia Miller is awesome. And everything that H&H has done for Hawkins?" He shook his head. "So cool that you're covering it for *The Post*. It'll be way better than whatever Marty's bullying Sean into publishing these days."

"Mostly golf stuff," Nancy said.

Jonathan winced. "Riveting."

She smiled. It was so good seeing him. It was always good seeing him. The thing was—she sometimes forgot how good it felt, being with him, until they were together again.

If it didn't feel painful when they were apart…what did that mean?

Nancy shook that question off. *Good thing we won't have to* be *apart*, she told herself. "You should come in," she said, nodding back over her shoulder. "My mom and I were just looking over the Emerson packet."

Something froze behind Jonathan's eyes. "The what?"

Nancy tugged at his hand, drawing him through the front door. "Come on," she said. "We can look at dorms together."

"Dorms *together*?" Mom said from the kitchen. Her hearing must have been superhuman.

"Not like that, Mom," Nancy chided as she pulled Jonathan out onto the linoleum.

Her mother had composed herself admirably. There wasn't a single rogue streak of mascara to be seen. She was at the kitchen counter, setting a fresh pot of coffee on to brew.

Mom glanced up with a smile. "Jonathan! Coffee?"

"I'm, um—" Jonathan stammered. His hand was clammy in Nancy's. She shot him a curious glance, but he was staring at some point in the middle distance, not making eye contact with anyone. "I'm okay. Thank you, Mrs. Wheeler."

"Suit yourself." Mom shrugged, sifting grounds into the basket of the family's Mr. Coffee. "And Nancy—dorms *together*?"

"I told you, it's not like that," Nancy groaned, sinking back into the kitchen chair she'd vacated a few minutes ago. Jonathan sat across from her, his movements unnatural and robotic. "The dorms are co-ed, but they're separated by floor. One floor girls, one floor boys. So even if Jonathan and I were both in"—she glanced down at the page Mom had turned to—"the Little Building?"

"Little Building?" Jonathan echoed, coming back to himself a little. "That's a dorm?"

Nancy shrugged. “Why not? My point is, it’s not like we’d be living in the same *room*.”

“Hm,” Mom responded tightly, flicking the switch on the coffee maker.

Jonathan pulled the packet over to his side of the table and absently flicked through the pages. Nancy winced as he came across more evidence of the mail inspector’s lunch. “Sorry,” she said, flicking a finger at an egregious smear. “It’s pretty gross. You should bring yours over next time. We can look through it without staining our clothes.”

Still staring down at the packet, Jonathan took a deep breath, like he was bracing himself for something. “I actually…didn’t get one of these.”

Nancy frowned. “Weird…I think the deadline to return them is coming up.”

Jonathan nodded. “Yeah.”

He didn’t seem worried enough. “Jonathan, if you miss the deadline, they’re going to assume you’re not going at all. They might give your spot away.” A thought hit her, and she reached across the table and poked his arm. “Oh, it’s probably just because you’re still in temporary housing. How are they supposed to know where to deliver your mail?”

Jonathan flipped to another page.

Nancy glanced back over her shoulder to her mom. “Would it be weird if Jonathan’s family got their mail delivered here? Just so he doesn’t lose any of his stuff?”

Mom was watching the two of them, still as a statue. Nancy could almost see the gears moving in her brain, ponderous and analytic. It was a strange contrast with the warm emotion that had poured all over her mother’s face just a second ago. “I’ll have to check with Joyce,” she said, her tone curiously cold.

“Well…” Nancy said, drawing out the word and pairing it with the best *What is going on with you?* eyes that she could muster. “For now, you can take my copy. Look”—she flipped to the front of the packet, showing him the table of contents—“this thing tells you all about the dorms, but also, like, whatever other student facilities they have available. And there’s a

class list, because we're going to have to submit our registration preferences in a couple of weeks—"

"That's okay," Jonathan said, pushing back from the table. "You should keep it."

"I've already looked through it," Nancy reassured him. "Actually, I've probably already memorized it at this point. Seriously, take it, it's no big deal—"

"I know, but—" Jonathan's gaze flicked to Mom, who was still studying them, and then back to Nancy again. He gulped, and Nancy could see his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat. "Maybe we should talk about this later."

Nancy's brow furrowed in confusion. "Talk about what? I'm just saying you can borrow my registration packet until yours comes."

"Nancy!" Her name burst out of him in an explosion of frustration. Jonathan took a moment to compose himself, closing his eyes for a moment. "I don't think I'm going to Emerson in the fall."

Behind Nancy, Mom plonked a coffee mug down onto the counter. Nancy didn't turn to see why—she was too busy staring at Jonathan. "What?"

Jonathan shrugged, like he was trying to play this off as some casual statement. Like he wasn't shredding his own future into confetti. Like this was *nothing*. "There's just too much…going on here right now for me to be able to leave."

"Are you kidding?" Nancy could barely process what she was hearing.

He had the gall to blink, as though this question was insulting. "Am I—*no,* Nancy, I'm not kidding. My mom and my brother are stuck in shitty—sorry, Mrs. Wheeler—in *terrible* temporary housing, and you think I'd just walk away from them so that I can pretend like everything is normal, halfway across the country?"

Nancy flinched back in her chair. "No," she said. "I don't think that. But—by the time we leave—" *Vecna can't hide forever. We'll find him. I'll find him.*

“We don’t know what the world is going to look like by the time we’re supposed to leave,” Jonathan said, a little gentler now. “Right now, I have to focus on my family. On finding us a place to live that has, I don’t know, a kitchen. Running water. A toilet we don’t have to share with five other families and ten random army guys.”

“So you’re just throwing your future away?” Nancy asked, still incredulous. “Because you’re scared?”

“Because I’m *realistic*,” Jonathan said. The kitchen chair scraped against the linoleum as he stood. “I gotta go. I’m supposed to check out some house near the steel mill that I already know we can’t afford. I’ll see you later.”

“Jonathan—” Nancy protested.

“It was good to see you, Mrs. Wheeler,” Jonathan told Nancy’s mom. But she had busied herself at the coffee maker, her back a solid wall to Jonathan. She didn’t glance over to him as she hummed an acknowledgment. Jonathan just gave a tired nod at this frosty response, waved to Nancy, and trudged to the front door.

Nancy watched him go, feeling a hole start to yawn in her gut. “He’s going to get himself stuck in this town,” she muttered, as the door clicked shut behind him.

Mom finally turned, her coffee mug clutched in both hands. She stared after Jonathan alongside her daughter. “I’m afraid so, sweetheart,” she told her daughter. Her gaze flickered sideways and landed on Nancy. “I’m afraid so.”

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Chapter Eleven

If the lawn outside Joey Taft's house had ever been green and alive, that had changed long before Joey's death five days ago. Brown grass stretched from the curb all the way up to the front door, making some impressive headway on the cracked and broken concrete walkway that split the lawn in two.

The biggest clue behind the yard's demise was the jagged hole, torn deep into the dirt, about five feet from the street. While the Rift was glowing and pulsating beneath iron plates a few blocks away, this crater was totally mundane—the space where a tree had once stood, before the earthquake had dislodged it and sent it toppling.

Now, the only shade in the Tafts' front yard was cast by the Hearth & Home billboard that had been erected out front. SAVING TOWNS. CHANGING LIVES. And under the blaze of the Indiana sun, the lawn had fried to a crisp.

It crunched under Nancy's and Robin's shoes as they approached the house. "We gotta get Joey's grandmother a landscaper," Robin mumbled to herself. Nancy winced in agreement and rang the doorbell.

The loud chime echoed somewhere in the depths of the house. Nancy waited until the last tones had died away. But there was no movement inside, no sign that anyone was coming to the door.

"If she's that sick," Robin ventured, "then maybe she can't hear us. She could be asleep?"

"Who could sleep through *that* doorbell?"

"Me after finals."

Nancy hit the doorbell again, and again there was no answer. But as she turned back toward Robin—

“Excuse me!”

There was someone standing on the front step of the house next door, a woman who looked to be in her late sixties. She waved at Nancy and Robin and made a beeline toward them, crunching across the dried grass.

Nancy shot Robin a mystified glance and received only a shrug in return. “Um, hi!”

The woman drew to a bustling stop in front of the two girls. “Are you looking for Mrs. Taft?”

“That’s right,” Nancy said. “I’m Nancy. This is Robin. We’re—we were friends of Joey’s. From school. We wanted to come by and pass along our condolences.”

“Such a tragedy, what happened to that boy,” the woman said, shaking her head. “He always was a help around the neighborhood. You know, he brought me my paper every morning?”

“Do you know where she might have gone?” Robin asked. “Joey’s grandma, I mean. Mrs. Taft. Where she went?”

“We know she’s been sick,” Nancy said. “Between that and…what happened to Joey…we just want to make sure she’s okay.”

“Well, aren’t you sweet,” the woman said. “Of course. Wilhelmina—that’s Mrs. Taft—she’s been checked in to Hawkins Memorial. I’m afraid that her condition had taken a turn for the worse even before Joey died. If you’re looking for her, you should find her there.” She patted Nancy’s arm. “And when you see her, you tell her Cynthia’s looking after her place, all right?”

“Thank you, Miss Cynthia,” Nancy said with her sugariest smile. “We’ll definitely let her know that it’s in good hands.”

But Nancy’s sweet smile vanished as soon as she and Robin started making their way back to Nancy’s car. “Hawkins Memorial?” Nancy murmured. “Shit.”

“What’s the problem?” Robin asked. “We know where she is. We can go talk to her.”

“The *problem*,” Nancy said, “is that HMH is hard to get into even when the town isn’t under quarantine. Sneaking in to talk to Mrs. Taft now? It’s

going to be practically impossible."

"Who said we have to sneak?" Robin asked.

Nancy raised an eyebrow. "They're not just gonna let us wander the halls."

Robin hummed, her gaze distant. There was a plan formulating somewhere behind her eyes. "Maybe," she said.

"Robin…"

"I have a thought, okay?" Robin said. "It's just a thought, like, a baby thought. A thoughtlet."

"Is this thoughtlet going to get us into the hospital?"

"It might," Robin said. "But it's going to take a second. I just need to… work my magic."

Nancy's second eyebrow joined her first near her hairline. "Magic?"

"Forget—God, forget I said that." Robin was bright red, tugging the handle of the car door. "Why is this still locked? Don't you have things to do? Places to be?"

She was acting weird, and that twinged at every one of Nancy's journalistic (and just plain nosy) senses. Nancy did her best to push them aside and climbed into the car without prying. It wasn't polite to snoop on friends. And besides, Robin was right. Nancy did have somewhere to be. And she was already running late.

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Chapter Twelve

"Did you grab a hard hat?"

Georgia Miller had to shout to be heard over the relentless thunder of demolition, and even then, Nancy could barely hear her. She waved the neon-green hard hat that she'd been presented with upon her arrival at the worksite and almost lost her balance as rubble shifted under her feet.

"Careful!" Georgia said, lunging forward to steady Nancy before she could join the shattered slabs of concrete that surrounded them.

They were standing in front of a two-story office complex a few blocks east of downtown Hawkins. What had once been a quiet little front plaza with a bubbling water feature was now a treacherous maze of debris, destroyed first by the earthquake, and then again by Hearth & Home as they'd cleared the way to repair the building itself.

"Sorry," Nancy said once she was upright. "I didn't plan on manual labor when I was picking out my outfit this morning. The pumps were—"

"Don't you dare say a word against those heels," Georgia said. "They're stellar. Let's just make sure you're showing them off without breaking an ankle, okay?"

Nancy grinned and picked her way after Georgia.

The puff piece on Hearth & Home and Georgia Miller had not been at the top of Nancy's list of priorities. To tell the truth, Nancy had completely forgotten that it had even been assigned to her until her mother had brought Georgia up during their Emerson dorm discussion. The reminder had finally coerced her into calling the Hearth & Home offices in Hawkins. As makeshift as the offices were, there was no receptionist, but whoever had

answered the phone certainly hadn't been the happiest to hear that a reporter was interested in coming by. It had only been when she'd mentioned Georgia's friendship with Nancy's mother that she'd made any headway.

And now here she was edging along through the evidence of Hearth & Home's reconstructive efforts. The deafening thunder of the jackhammers was almost bearable as Nancy entered the front lobby; Nancy no longer found herself fighting an urge to clap her hands over her ears.

Some of that relief must have shown on her face, because Georgia gave her a sympathetic wince. "The whole building was built on a slab foundation," she said, "and that's great for a lot of things. It's cheap. Durable. You'll never get termites. But God forbid your plumbing springs a leak, or completely gives out due to, say, an earthquake. We have to rip out the entire basement just to get the toilets flushing again."

Nancy fumbled for her notebook and scribbled out the words *flushing toilets* before reconsidering. "You're not tearing the place down?" she asked.

"We try to keep the demolition to a minimum at H&H," Georgia said. In contrast to Nancy's heels, Georgia was wearing steel-toe work boots that handled the construction debris of the dusty lobby with ease.

"A minimum?" Nancy threw a disbelieving glance behind her.

Georgia laughed. "I know it might not look like it, but yes. A minimum. Here." She held open the door to one of the office suites, beckoning Nancy through.

It wasn't until Nancy was inside that she figured out where she was. A quick glance at the placard on the open door confirmed it—this was the office of Dr. Larson, the pediatrician who had taken care of Nancy and Mike growing up, and who still saw Holly. He was a gentle man who was quick to swap out a tongue depressor with a lollipop when the exam was over and who never made you feel bad about crying during vaccinations.

He'd also set aside one of the walls in the waiting room for a mural of all the kids he'd treated over his decades of practicing medicine. Handprints covered almost every inch of the usable space, smears of bright paint overlapping one another. Nancy could still see the purple print she'd left

behind in the upper left corner. Mike's was a little farther down. Holly hadn't left hers yet, but Nancy knew she was excited for the chance.

She didn't realize how long she'd been staring at the mural until Georgia spoke up at her shoulder. "We could have torn this building down," she said. "Rebuilt it from the ground up. It'd honestly have been easier. Cheaper. And Tyler's crew wouldn't be threatening to destroy their jackhammers right now." Nancy turned to look at her. "I'm sure you've seen our billboards around town, right?"

"One or two of them," Nancy said wryly.

"*Saving Towns. Changing Lives,*" Georgia recited, followed by an apologetic smile. "I know it's trite. Would you believe me if I told you that it tested extremely well?"

"I'll believe almost anything."

"What a quality in a journalist," Georgia said with a wink. She crouched down, pointing at a yellow handprint near the bottom of the mural. It had been overlapped by the fingers of another eager kid, but not enough to block it out completely. "That was me. A hundred years ago. Everywhere that H&H goes, every community we step into, they've all got their murals. Their Dr. Larsons. Their special details that are worth preserving. Saving towns is about *saving* the towns, you know? Not just bulldozing them and throwing something else up in their place. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah, it does." Nancy was already writing, pencil flying, trying to scribble Georgia's words down as fast as she could. "You said during commencement that you never wanted to come back to Hawkins."

Georgia let out an explosive little laugh. "You don't pull any punches, do you?"

"It's not a punch."

"Could have fooled me." Georgia sat back on her heels and looked up at Nancy. "Is there a question in there?"

"How does it feel?" Nancy asked. "Now that you *are* back?"

Something shuttered over Georgia's expression. The stare that she pinned Nancy with was inscrutable, her eyes hardening to stone. "It…"

Georgia stopped. Maybe she had surprised herself by how hollow her voice had sounded. It had certainly surprised Nancy. “It feels—”

“Hey, boss.” There was a man standing in the open doorway, raining cement dust onto the already filthy floor. He was tall—so tall that his hard hat almost scraped the top of the doorframe—and skinny, with an impressively full light-brown mustache.

“Tyler, hey.” Georgia stood with a groan, wincing as her spine gave a few audible pops. “This is Nancy Wheeler. She’s doing a piece on H&H for *The Hawkins Post*.”

“Welcome, welcome,” Tyler said, face splitting in a friendly grin. He tugged a heavy-duty work glove off his hand before reaching down to shake Nancy’s.

Georgia waved along their introduction. “Nancy, Tyler Gorse, my second-in-command. Nothing gets done at these job sites without him.”

“They’ve tried,” Tyler said. “They’ve failed.”

“You sound like a pretty important man,” Nancy said.

“Eh.” Tyler banished her compliment with a twitch of the shoulders. “I just know how to keep things moving. Speaking of which. Georgia—last looks at the basement?”

“Coming,” Georgia said. “How about you, Nancy? Do you want to see the belly of the beast?”

Nancy screwed her hard hat farther down over her hair. “As long as my ankles can handle it.”

Her ankles were increasingly uncertain about the situation as Nancy followed Georgia and Tyler down the stairs, and Nancy privately vowed to cycle these pumps out of her wardrobe rotation. (She should *know* by now that she should always be prepared to run at a moment’s notice.) Tyler was kind enough to offer her an arm on the last few stairs, where the earthquake had dislodged the railing from its moorings, and Nancy alighted onto the wreckage of the basement floor without disaster.

The destruction upstairs might have been kept to a “minimum,” whatever that meant to Georgia, but down here, the proverbial wrecking ball had swung without restraint. Every inch of the place had been gutted.

The drywall had been yanked out, channels had been ripped into the unfinished concrete floor, and piles of warped, ancient piping rested against the walls. Nancy would have to trust that Tyler and Georgia were sure their demolition hadn't compromised the structural integrity of the building. It would be irritating to die in a construction accident after she'd survived so many more interesting near-death experiences.

"This is the foundation?" Nancy asked, once she'd figured out her footing and released Tyler's arm.

"Yes, ma'am," Tyler said. He trudged over to the edge of one of the trenches, and Nancy followed suit, peering inside when he pointed into the trench's depths. It wasn't difficult to see. High-powered work lamps blasted the space with flat white light, washing over every nook and cranny. It was easy to pick out the grooves where heavy machinery had carved away at the concrete, slicing through it to the exposed earth beneath.

"Now, it might sound redundant," Tyler said, squatting down beside the trench, "but the foundation is really…the foundation, you know?"

"You're gonna have to get a little more eloquent than that if you want her to follow you, Ty." Georgia laughed, perching on the creaking stairs.

Nancy tapped her notepad with the end of her pencil. "No, I actually think I get what you mean." She paced the length of the trench, up until the point where it branched off, one channel leading left and the other continuing on straight. "You're saying, the foundation is where you start, right?"

Tyler snapped his fingers at her. "Right. *Exactly*." He made a face at Georgia. "Who says I'm not eloquent, huh?"

Georgia grinned, rolling her eyes. "There's a first for everything."

"The foundation's the first thing we take a look at when we take on a new project," Tyler said, hopping over the trench to face Nancy from the other side. "You gotta see what kinda shape it's in. If it's fucked—"

"Tyler," Georgia warned.

"Then the whole building is fucked," Nancy said, filling in the rest of the sentence.

“It’s not the fifties anymore, Miller,” Tyler shot over at Georgia. “The kids these days know words that’ll make your ears bleed.”

“Don’t teach him any,” Georgia told Nancy. “You’ll warp him.”

“So this is where your ‘as little demolition as possible’ policy starts?” Nancy asked.

Tyler’s sweeping arm took in the entire room. “Right here in the basement,” he said. “We open her up. Figure out what needs fixing. Figure out what’s *worth* fixing. And then we get to work from there.”

“You do this in *every* building?” Nancy asked. “Tear open the floor?”

“It’s not always this extreme,” Georgia said. “Sometimes Tyler or one of his crew can just go scurrying around in the crawl space under a house and check it out that way. But spots like this—”

“Slab foundation,” Nancy said.

Georgia’s smile made Nancy feel like she had won something. “She listens.”

“She writes things down, boss,” Tyler said. “But you’re right on the money, kid.”

“So if this foundation *isn’t* a lost cause,” Nancy said, doubtfully surveying the wreckage that had been made of the basement, “then what happens next?”

“You really want to get him started?” Georgia asked.

“It’s why I’m here,” Nancy said. “What happens next? How do you start saving towns and changing lives?”

Tyler’s mustache gave a gleeful twitch. “How much do you know about slab jacking or helical piers?”

Not much at all, was the answer, and Nancy soon found herself adrift in a sea of technical terms. They flowed out of Tyler without pause. It didn’t take long until Nancy’s writing hand was cramping, and she had to settle for scribbling down only every third or fourth word Tyler said.

“*Okay,*” Georgia finally said, cutting in just as Tyler’s monologue was rounding the corner from sump pumps and toward French drains. “I think you’ve talked Nancy’s ear off enough for one day. Right, Ty?”

Tyler winced. “Sorry. I get a little carried away.”

“You know your stuff,” Nancy said, flexing her fingers to get a little feeling back into them. “You must have been working in construction for a long time.”

Tyler shrugged, hopping down into the trench. “Twenty years, give or take.”

He looked like he was in his late thirties, which would mean he had a pretty early start.

“Family business?” Nancy asked.

“Nah,” he said. “My family’s not the work-with-your-hands type, you know? I wanted to do something different. Go another direction.”

“I think Nancy knows a little bit about that,” Georgia said.

“I should probably head out,” Nancy said, flipping her notebook shut. “Thanks for giving me so much of your time.”

“It was my pleasure,” Georgia said. “Tyler’s too. He never gets to have anyone just listen to him go on like that.”

“See you around, kid,” Tyler called. The only sign of him was a single gloved hand waving above the lip of the trench.

“He can get out of there, right?” Nancy whispered to Georgia as they made their way back up the stairs.

“If I don’t see him by the end of the day, I’ll throw down a rope,” Georgia said with a quiet snicker. She walked with Nancy back through the building’s lobby and out onto the sidewalk. “You get home safe, okay?”

“Sure. Hey, Georgia?” Nancy shifted her weight between her feet, twisting her purse strap in one hand. “I know you said you never wanted to come back to Hawkins. And I know these aren’t really the *best* circumstances. But what you guys are doing here…” The image of the handprints on the office wall flashed before her eyes. She smiled. “It’s really great.”

Something flickered in Georgia’s eyes, just for a split-second—sadness? Doubt? It was gone too quickly for Nancy to decipher, wiped away by another one of those winning grins.

“Thanks,” Georgia said. “It always means a lot to hear that. And hey—” She stopped Nancy as she turned to go. “Boston. Give me a call.”

“I’ll send you the article when it’s done!” Nancy said. She waved back over her shoulder as she made her way down the sidewalk, digging her keys out of her bag and trying to remember where she’d left her car.

She’d only gone a few steps when something prickled the back of her neck, ominous and familiar. Awareness poured over her skin. Nancy’s head shot up, scanning the street ahead of her, the street behind her—and sure enough…

There was a man watching her.

He was standing, still as a statue, under a tree a little ways down the road. Nancy might have missed him completely except for the fact that, in this sea of pickup trucks and coveralls, he was wearing a black suit and tie.

For a moment, Nancy almost allowed herself to ignore him. To think she was imagining things. To believe that he was just an office worker on a walk before heading back to his cubicle.

But this was Hawkins. And if the past three years had taught Nancy anything, it was to embrace her paranoia. If she thought that a man in a black suit was watching her, then a man in a black suit was watching her.

Okay then. *If he wants to watch me, then he can damn well tell me why.* Hoisting her purse higher onto her shoulder, Nancy strode forward, picking up speed as she went—down the broken sidewalk, past her car, heading straight for him.

If Nancy had been in his shoes—if she’d been spotted by the person she’d been staking out—she would have panicked. No matter how many times she faced down extra-planar monsters or amoral government agents, she’d never been able to conquer the stomach-sinking feeling of *shit, they see me.*

This guy, though—he didn’t flinch at Nancy’s approach. His neutral expression didn’t shift a millimeter. He just calmly kept his gaze leveled at her, watching the whole time as he unlatched the door of his sedan and slid into the driver’s seat.

“Hey!” Nancy called, picking up the pace—and yeah, okay, the pumps were definitely getting moved out of the rotation, because if hiking through

the construction site had been difficult, then sprinting down this choppy sidewalk was nearly impossible. “Hey!”

Through the windshield, she could see the little smile he gave her. Then he slid a pair of aviators onto his nose, turned the car on, signaled—*signaled!*—and wheeled the sedan out onto the road, leaving Nancy to watch until his taillights disappeared out of sight.

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Chapter Thirteen

"No way," Robin whispered.

"I'm serious," Nancy whispered back. "Totally serious."

"The black suit? The sedan? The drive-away-as-soon-as-you-walk-up?" Nancy wasn't sure whether Robin was excited or aghast. "What is this, *The Conversation*?"

Nancy just shrugged to get out of admitting that she'd never seen it. "I think it's just Hawkins."

Robin shook her head before dusting her hands off on her trousers. Crouching, she gripped the bottom of the crate they'd been whispering across. "Okay. Over there?"

With a nod, Nancy followed suit. Together, the girls hauled the heavy box toward the wall, stacking it on top of a couple of milk crates before cautiously stepping back, hoping against hope that it wouldn't topple over.

When Jimmy "Fasthands" Lee fled town before the quarantine, leaving his chair at WSQK open for Robin to slide into, it had seemed like a total gift. At first. Just like Nancy's position at *The Hawkins Post*, working at the local radio station—the Squawk, as it was affectionately called—meant another bird's-eye view of the comings and goings of post-lockdown Hawkins. Yes, Robin still had to deal with military oversight, but her Corporal Young was a friendly communications specialist named Poole who spent more time scavenging for cigarettes than he did reading through the daily run-of-shows that Robin threw together for him.

But it had been one thing to take over the DJ's seat. It had been another to take over the radio station. Because while Jimmy Fasthands had been incredible at spinning the "Golden Hits of the '50s and '60s," he'd been less

than incredible at keeping the building habitable. And after two weeks of reaching Hawkins through a microphone that smelled like someone else's burps and beer, Robin had called in backup.

Which was why Steve and Jonathan were upstairs somewhere—hopefully in hazmat suits—scrubbing out the bathroom and the kitchenette, while Nancy and Robin were sequestered in the basement, hunting down whatever was generating the *god-awful stench* that was somehow perfuming the entire building.

A tricky job to start with. And it was only made trickier by Jimmy's method of storing the station's records, which seemed to have been *wherever there's floor space*, a strategy that had resulted in no floor space at all. Nancy and Robin had had to pick their way carefully across the basement, shuffling crates and cardboard boxes and loose record sleeves aside as they went.

"I guess that's a good point," Robin said, wiping her sleeve across her forehead. It left behind a streak of black grime. "There's no way of knowing that you're onto anything in this stupid town until some government agent in a polyester suit shows up on your doorstep."

Nancy snorted, then coughed when her exhale sent up a plume of dust. "I just wish I could have talked to him," she said. "I mean, he obviously *wanted* me to see that he was watching. So what's the point of just driving away?"

"Intimidation? Maybe he wanted to make you paranoid."

"But now I don't know what to be paranoid *about*."

"Who's being paranoid?"

Nancy and Robin squinted up the stairs. Through the haze of dust, Nancy could see Jonathan standing in the doorway, silhouetted against the morning light. He had elbow-length rubber gloves on and a handkerchief tied over his mouth and nose.

"You look terrifying," Robin said.

"I'd rather look terrifying than be suffocating on toxic cleaning fumes. Who's being paranoid?"

“Me,” Nancy told him. “Because we still haven’t found whatever’s stinking up this place.”

“Maybe it’s Steve,” Robin chipped in.

“You watch yourself, Buckley, or I’ll come down there,” Steve called from somewhere behind Jonathan.

“If we don’t find it when we’re done moving these boxes, I think we’re gonna have to start going *through* the boxes,” Nancy said, ignoring Steve’s contribution. “Which is going to take…”

“A million years,” Robin groaned.

“Could be in the air vents?” Jonathan ventured. “I’ll take a look when I’m done with the kitchen. I just wanted to ask—do we have any more bleach?”

“Whatever you have is what I brought,” Nancy told him.

“Shit,” Steve muttered in the background. “We’re almost out.”

“So go *get some more*,” Robin chided.

“Where?” Steve demanded.

“Oh my God—it’s *bleach*. It’s *everywhere*.”

“I’m not transporting *bleach* in my baby,” Steve said, finally appearing at Jonathan’s shoulder. Jonathan didn’t bother to stop himself from rolling his eyes. “What if it leaks?”

“I can’t, with him,” Robin muttered.

“I’ll go to the drugstore,” Jonathan offered. “I could use some air, anyway.”

Nancy waved. “Thank you.”

“Love you,” Jonathan called down. He was already out of sight, walking toward the Squawk’s front doors, but Nancy was reasonably sure he’d said this for Steve’s benefit rather than hers. At any rate, he was already gone by the time Nancy offered her own “Love you” back. Then there was the distant sound of a car engine starting and the moment—as strange and awkward as it had been—was over.

Nancy turned back to Robin to find that she was already watching her. “What?”

“I mean.” Robin spread her hands, waving them at the stairs, at the Squawk, and at Nancy. “Not to put too fine a point on it, Nance, but generally speaking? Yeesh.”

Yeesh was absolutely right. There was a reason that Nancy was down in this stinky basement with Robin rather than upstairs with Steve or Jonathan. Just stepping into a room with both of the boys was starting to make her feel like the rope in a game of tug-of-war.

But every time she tried to figure out a way to navigate this *extremely stupid* situation, she got a headache. Avoidance had been her tactic thus far, and Nancy didn’t see a reason to abandon a winning strategy.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said.

Robin blew a raspberry. “Oh come *on*. Yes, you do. You’ve got the Tweedle Twins up there scrubbing toilets because you *asked* them to, and I’m pretty sure they’re both half a breath away from old-timey fisticuffs if the other idiot breathes the wrong way.”

“They’re just trying to help out.”

Robin snorted. “Do you know how many times I’ve tried to get Steve to *help out* around here? It boggles the mind.”

This conversation was not one Nancy was emotionally or spiritually prepared to have. She turned, stalking toward the nearest record bin. Rosemary Clooney smoldered up at her from the topmost sleeve, promising a thrilling *Mambo Italiano*. The array of music in the depths of this station was truly something else. “Have you checked this box yet?”

There was no response from Robin. When Nancy looked back, she found her staring into the middle distance. From her little frown, whatever thought she was lost in wasn’t a particularly pleasant one. “Robin?”

“Yeah,” Robin said, distantly. “I mean, no, I haven’t checked that box yet. Yeah, I hear you.”

Shit. If the situation was getting to Robin this bad, then maybe Nancy’s strategy wasn’t so winning after all. She chewed her lip.

“Listen, if the whole Steve-Jonathan thing bugs you that much, I can, I don’t know, try to get them to work things out with each other.”

That jolted Robin out of her fog. She grimaced. “No, *God*, no. The last thing this world needs is a couple more gorillas squaring up with one another. I was just thinking—I can’t believe this stuff is this hard, even for you.” She looked at Nancy. “Like—okay, so, with that guy yesterday, the man-in-black type. You just walked up to him.”

“I would have but—”

“Yeah, yeah, poof, alakazam, he disappears on you. I get it. I’m just saying, like—like I’ve been in some dicey situations, you know? Alternate dimensions. Russian torture. But I didn’t *walk up* to those Russian torturers and ask, like, *Hey guys. This is a pretty cool setup. What are you guys up to down here?”* Robin shook her head. “You’ve got *balls*. And don’t you look surprised—you’ve heard this before. I *know* you have. Chutzpah, moxie, whatever you call it, it’s oozing out of that curly head of yours.”

Where was this going? A glance into the record bin yielded no clues from Rosemary. Nancy would have to face this inexplicable diatribe head-on. “What’s happening?”

“What’s happening is you’ve got all that confidence when it comes to maybe getting kidnapped by some random guy on the street. But when it comes to your personal life, you’re literally hiding from your problems in the basement.” Robin pointed a finger right in Nancy’s face. “*J’accuse,* Wheeler. You’re a *coward.* Just like the rest of us.”

Nancy gaped. She wasn’t a *coward*. She just had a *strategy*. “I told you before. Things are just—they’re complicated.”

“Complicated, sure.” There was still a trace of that faraway fog in Robin’s eyes as her gaze drifted to some point past Nancy’s shoulder. “Do you ever think, maybe, if we weren’t so busy saving the world all the time, that things would be a little *less* complicated?”

Once again, Nancy was suddenly back at graduation, catching a glimpse of a life she hadn’t lived. *Living friends. Happy town*. Would she still be with Steve, in that world? Would she have found her way to Jonathan? Did it really matter?

The questions—the vision—they nagged at her. And if the troubled look on Robin’s face was anything to go off of, then they nagged at Robin too.

“Hey—” Nancy abandoned Rosemary Clooney, easing toward Robin. “You okay?”

Robin’s hands were busy, one thumb restlessly picking at the nail polish on the opposite fingers. “M-hm.”

Nancy placed a cautious hand on Robin’s shoulder. “If something’s bothering you, you can—you can talk to me, you know?”

The smile Robin shot her way had a wry edge to it that Nancy wasn’t quite sure she liked. “No offense, Nance? But sometimes it’s hard to get you to sit still long enough to listen.”

“I listen!”

“Okay. Well. I was thinking.” Robin hissed out a long breath. “I was just thinking. This basement is a good space, right?”

“For…”

“Our war room. *Mission control*. Whatever. Just imagine it—” Robin paced across the floor, waving her arms. “Conspiracy board *here*. Research central *here*. No rooftops, no snooping parents. As long as we keep it secret from the dingus boys, we could do some serious strategizing in this basement.”

“What about the military?”

Robin shrugged. “What about them? Poole hasn’t come out here in weeks.”

Nancy took another look around the room, assessing. “It’s not a terrible plan,” she said. “Aside from the—”

“Stink, I know, a huge downside. But once we get that handled—”

Nancy smiled. “Then we’ve got our mission control.” Nancy trudged forward, grabbing the abandoned box of Rosemary Clooney records. “Now all we need is a lead.”

“Speaking of which…” Robin was tracing the corner of one of the stacked crates with the tip of her finger. “Do you know Vickie O’Neill?”

Nancy’s memory delivered a snapshot of red hair and a motormouth monologue. “We had world history together. And didn’t we see her at graduation?”

“Uh-huh.”

“She was in marching band too, right? Did she know Joey?”

“Uh-huh,” Robin said again. “I mean, yeah, she knew Joey a little. Not a lot. About as well as me.”

“Okay,” Nancy said. “So…we’re talking about her because…”

“Because…because…” Something complicated flashed across Robin’s face, but then it was wiped clear just as quickly. She seemed to sag a little where she stood, like resignation had taken over—like it had deflated her, just enough to feel. “Because she’s been volunteering at the hospital since the earthquake. She’s a candy striper.”

Electric hope surged through Nancy. “You think she could get us in to see Mrs. Taft?”

“I think…she could. I just haven’t…been able to ask her yet.”

More pieces slotted together. “This is why you were talking about confidence.”

Robin bit the inside of her cheek. “Sure. Yeah. Yes.”

“Well, I mean, how bad could it really be? You said it yourself—you’ve faced off with Soviet interrogators. And honestly, in the grand scheme of your experiences? That was bush league.” Nancy nudged Robin’s shoulder with her own. “Just *ask* her, Robin. What’s the worst that could happen? It’s not like the world’s gonna end—it already did that.”

“Oh, Nance,” Robin said. “You have no idea.”

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Chapter Fourteen

Robin asked Vickie. The world didn't end. But that was about all Nancy could say for certain, because Robin had imposed *stipulations* on this moment: Chiefly, that she would go ahead to the hospital on her bicycle so that she could ask Vickie without an audience. Nancy was relegated to idling in her car in the parking lot of Hawkins Memorial, watching the front doors and trying not to chew her fingernails.

After an unending half hour, Robin finally appeared, waving Nancy down. Nancy leapt out of the station wagon and trotted into the hospital lobby. "What took so long?" she whispered to Robin.

Robin just glanced at the petite redhead in the pink-and-white uniform who was waiting, grim-faced. "Vick's gonna get us inside," Robin said, which wasn't an answer. There wasn't time for Nancy to prod her for more of an explanation, because Robin was already falling in step behind Vickie, making her way toward the front desk.

Since visiting hours were reserved for friends and family, and since neither of those words applied to the nonexistent relationship between Nancy, Robin, and Joey's grandmother, Vickie ushered them past the front desk under the designation of "social outreach services." This, Vickie whispered as she hurried them along the corridor, was a wide enough blanket to include just about anything, as long as they didn't stop to answer any questions.

Once past the lobby, the girls moved along the hallway at a fast clip, Nancy and Robin struggling to keep up with Vickie's efficient pace. A hook lodged in Nancy's gait as she remembered that Max lay, alone and

unconscious, somewhere in this maze of blank linoleum and pallid fluorescent lights.

Maybe that, more than the fog of paranoia, was the reason that Nancy found herself fighting off a shudder as she trotted onward. “You can’t be in there long,” Vickie was saying to Robin under her breath, scurrying so fast that even Robin’s long legs struggled to keep up. “I mean, I don’t know what you were hoping for, but they like to keep things kind of slimmed down around here, personnel-wise, and if you’re not, like, a key blood relative, then Nurse Bonnie is gonna probably come tapping on Mrs. Taft’s door in a few minutes, and that’s if you’re lucky.”

“We’ll be out of your hair before you know it,” Robin told her. “Seriously, it’ll be like we were never even here.”

“I didn’t say that’s what I wanted,” Vickie retorted, flicking a sideways look in Robin’s direction. Robin stumbled over something, but as Nancy practically sprinted to catch up, she couldn’t spot what had tripped her.

Vickie led them to a nondescript door. The only indication that this was their destination was the manila folder in the plastic tray next to it. Nancy could see that W. TAFT had been scribbled across the tab with a leaking marker.

“Okay,” Vickie said, fixing both girls with nervous eyes. If there had been a trace of some kind of teasing in her voice a second ago, it was gone now—or maybe Nancy had just been imagining things. “Couple minutes. Like I said, that’s all I can guarantee you. And don’t…say anything to freak her out. We don’t want to screw her up any more than she’s already been screwed up.”

A chilling thought hit Nancy. “She knows about Joey. Right?”

Robin looked a little sick. “Oh, God.”

But Vickie just nodded grimly. “The cops told her. She—It was really sad, okay?”

There was a flicker of movement at Robin’s side—like she’d started to reach out for Vickie and then stopped herself. But Nancy didn’t have time to puzzle through this, because Vickie was rapping at the door to the

hospital room, easing it open to call in a chipper voice, “Hey there, Mrs. Taft. You got a second?”

“What the hell would I be doing?” was the grumpy response. Vickie shrugged toward Robin and Nancy, then pushed through the door. Robin followed a moment later, not meeting Nancy’s eyes, a flaming blush building in her cheeks. And Nancy, totally out of touch with whatever the hell had just happened, brought up the rear.

The hospital room they entered might as well have been the same one Nancy had barged into last summer. The only real difference was that this time there was actually someone in the bed.

Wilhelmina Taft was a tall woman, but she didn’t carry the bulk to fill out her lanky frame—or at least she didn’t *anymore*. Her hospital gown draped over the skeletal lines of her body like a blouse on a wire hanger, pooling off one thin shoulder before Vickie scurried forward to adjust it.

“Ah,” Mrs. Taft rasped up at Vickie. “Thanks.”

Vickie smiled. “It’s what I’m here for. Now, Mrs. Taft—this is Robin and Nancy. They were hoping you’d be willing to chat with them for a few minutes.”

Mrs. Taft’s watery green eyes slid from Robin to Nancy and then back again. One crepe-skinned hand reached up to self-consciously fidget with the oxygen tubing clipped to her nostrils. “Why would you want to talk to me for?”

Nancy took a half step forward. “We—we went to school with your grandson, Mrs. Taft.”

Her gaze returned to Nancy, and now that Nancy was watching more closely, she could see that Mrs. Taft’s eyes weren’t rheumy—they were brimming with unshed tears. “I thought you might have,” Mrs. Taft said. Her voice stayed strong, but one hand went to the side table, groping for the box of tissues that sat within easy reach.

“Here—” Nancy said, rushing forward to help. She pulled a tissue free and pressed it into Mrs. Taft’s shaking hand.

“Thank you, dear,” she said, dabbing at her cheeks.

“Are you all right in here, Mrs. Taft?” Vickie asked from the doorway. “I can stay if you want—”

“I’ll be fine, sweetheart,” Mrs. Taft said. She took a deep, bracing breath. “If these girls want to talk about Joey, then that’s something I am happy to oblige.”

“Then just…holler if you need me,” Vickie said. “I won’t be going far.” She shot another one of those indecipherable glances toward Robin, whose flame-red face was only growing redder by the second. Then she slipped out the door and eased it closed behind her.

“Sweet girl,” Mrs. Taft mumbled, busying herself by folding her tissue into a neat little square. “This place would fall apart without her. Now. Whatever you want to say about Joey, let’s hear it quick. No one wants to be stuck mopping up the tears of some old lady, do they?”

Nancy sank down into the chair next to Mrs. Taft’s bed. This close, she could hear the wheeze that rattled in the older woman’s chest with every inhale and exhale. “Have you been sick long, Mrs. Taft?”

“Long?” Mrs. Taft snorted. “Dear, my entire life, I’ve barely come down with the sniffles. Then one day—ooh, a few weeks ago—I woke up with a cough. I didn’t want to go to the doctor. I thought it would get better on its own. But Joey made me, and—” Her voice cracked. The tissue in her hands had been folded as many times as physics would allow, and now it slipped through her trembling fingers and fell into her lap.

“Here,” Nancy said, plucking another out of the box and handing it to her.

“He drove me to my appointment,” Mrs. Taft said, once she’d taken another deep, rattling breath. “He was there with me through all the tests. At first, the doctors said there was nothing wrong. But the cough got worse. Actually, I don’t mind telling you girls, but it really knocked me on my ass.”

Nancy buried her laugh behind her hand, but Robin didn’t bother, saying, “I bet it did, Mrs. Taft.”

“Chronic pneumonia,” Mrs. Taft said. “That’s what I’ve got, apparently. These lungs that’ve done well by me for seventy-four years have decided to

just up and crap out. No one can tell me why. I must've gotten sick along the way and not noticed it."

Nancy frowned. "That doesn't sound plausible."

"I'm just telling you what the doctors've been telling me," Mrs. Taft said, but the snap in her voice made it very clear that she didn't disagree with Nancy. She began coughing on the final word and didn't stop, the hacking heaves shuddering through her frail body.

"Mrs. Taft?" Nancy asked, starting to feel a little panicked.

The older woman just gestured at the nightstand next to Nancy—not at the tissue box but at the array of pill bottles next to it. Nancy scrabbled through them, holding them up one at a time for Mrs. Taft's headshake or nod—*no, no, no, yes that one give it to me now.* Nancy shook one of the approved pills into her hand and passed it to Mrs. Taft—

Wait a second.

Nancy froze, staring at the pill bottle in her hand. At the label.

There was Mrs. Taft's name. The name of the pharmaceutical manufacturer, Primrose Pharmaceuticals. The drug company's logo.

And the Rx number.

"Nance?" Robin was watching her from the other side of Mrs. Taft's bed, handing a cup of water to the woman to wash her medication down. "You okay?"

Nancy fumbled in her purse with one hand. "I think—hang on…*here*." The scrap of paper—Joey's scrap of paper—had gotten lodged at the bottom of her bag, and she had to give it a yank to disinter it. She unfolded it, smoothing it out onto the bedside table so she could read the numbers.

She didn't have to look far. She'd *known* the Rx number had seemed familiar, and here it was, the first entry on Joey's list. Nancy looked up at Robin with wide eyes.

"Mrs. Taft," she said slowly. "You mentioned…that Joey had come with you to every doctor's appointment?"

"That's right," Mrs. Taft said, a little raspier after her coughing fit.

"I'm guessing he did most of the pharmacy trips?" Nancy's fingers were drumming against the list, her fingernails tapping, completely outside of her

control. “Knew what you were taking? Filled your prescriptions?”

Mrs. Taft nodded, handing her water cup back to Robin. “He did,” she said. “He’s—he was a good boy.”

Robin cocked her head. “You’re onto something,” she said. It wasn’t a question.

Nancy waved the paper at her. “This list,” she said, hearing the excited shake in her voice. “It’s *prescription numbers*. This one right here—that’s Mrs. Taft’s.” She quickly scanned the Rx numbers on the rest of the assembled pill bottles. “This is hers too,” she said, tapping the paper. “And this one.”

“There’s twenty numbers on that list,” Robin said. “Mrs. Taft isn’t on twenty medications.” She looked at Mrs. Taft. “Are you?”

“If I was, I wouldn’t be this chatty,” Mrs. Taft said.

But Nancy had already considered that point—considered it, and come to a gut-churning conclusion. “Maybe Mrs. Taft isn’t the only person Joey was looking into. He spent a lot of time in this hospital. He knew who else was here, especially if he was making a lot of trips down to the pharmacy.”

Mrs. Taft was losing patience with Nancy’s run-up. “Spit it out, young lady.”

“Spit it out,” Robin echoed, nodding.

“Maybe—” Nancy turned to Mrs. Taft. “Maybe you’re not the only person who’s gotten sick the way you have, Mrs. Taft.”

Robin paced around the bed, chewing the inside of her cheek. “How many others do you think there are?”

“I don’t know.” Nancy waved the list again. “But Joey gave us a way to find out.”

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Chapter Fifteen

Nancy was about to open Mrs. Taft's hospital room door when Robin said, "Let me handle this."

She paused, frowning back at Robin. "Handle what? Handle Vickie?"

Robin shrugged, shoving her hands into her pockets. She glanced over at Mrs. Taft, who was lying in her bed with her eyes closed, looking absolutely drained. "Sometimes you can come on a little…strong." Robin's apologetic wince did nothing to take the sting out of her words.

"Strong is how you get things done," Nancy protested.

"Only in weight lifting," Robin said under her breath.

Nancy shook her head, reaching for the doorknob once again. "Trust me," she said. "I'm a journalist. I know how to get answers."

Vickie was waiting in the hallway just outside Mrs. Taft's door, so close that Nancy almost ran into her as she stepped out of the room.

"Hey!" Vickie said, whirling to face her. Her eyes flicked nervously from Nancy to Robin to the room behind them and then back again. "Um, hey. You guys are all done? Everything okay? Mrs. Taft?" Vickie leaned left around Nancy. "Do you need anything?"

"I could hear you fretting through that door, sweetheart," Mrs. Taft said. "You worry too much."

"You look upset." Vickie's nervous energy evaporated in a split second, replaced by laser-focused concern. She glared at Nancy, then at Robin, who looked like she was ready to evaporate as well. "Did they upset you? What did you guys do? You're not even really supposed to *be* here, you know. *Why* are you upsetting Mrs. Taft?"

“I’m sorry—” Robin squeaked, but Mrs. Taft cut in, putting her out of her misery before she could spontaneously combust.

“It’s the world that’s got me all twisted up, not these girls,” Mrs. Taft said, as stern as a woman could be in a hospital gown. “Now you stop giving them a hard time. It is a blessing to be able to talk about Joey, and it’s good to know that there were people in this town who cared about him just like I did.”

A squirm of guilt went through Nancy’s stomach, but she smiled through it. “That’s exactly how I feel as well,” she said. “But you’re right. We have been upsetting Mrs. Taft. It’s probably best if we let her rest.”

The expression on Vickie’s face loudly proclaimed that she more than agreed. She held the door open, and Robin and Nancy obediently allowed themselves to be ushered out of the room.

The door clicked emphatically shut behind them. Vickie was already starting down the hallway, her quick pace obviously intended to sweep Robin and Nancy in her wake. When she realized they weren’t following, she stopped and turned back to them with a despairing look. “You know visiting hours are almost over, right?”

“We know,” Robin said, staring at some point over Vickie’s head like eye contact was, for some reason, a step too far right now. “There’s just—we had something else we needed to ask you. *Not* visiting-hours-related!” she hastened to add, like that would do anything to dispel Vickie’s growing exasperation. “We’re not going to ask you to help us harass any of your other patients, ha-ha.”

“Ha-ha,” echoed Vickie, with a disbelief that Nancy felt in her bones.

“We had a question about Mrs. Taft’s prescription,” Nancy said.

“About—no.” Vickie shook her head. “That is so far into the world of confidential information, it’s not even funny. I could honestly have you banned from the hospital for even *asking* me that question. I could have you *arrested*.”

Nancy frowned. “I don’t think—”

“I was doing you a favor, letting you see Mrs. Taft,” Vickie said. The soles of her Keds squeaked against the linoleum as she circled behind

Robin and Nancy. Waving both of her arms, she started to usher them down the hallway, like she was a collie and they were a couple of wayward sheep. “Actually, I was doing Joey a favor. *Actually*, you know what? I was doing *Mrs. Taft* a favor. Or at least I thought so. But if you’re just going to take the opportunity to invade an old woman’s privacy, then it’s really gotta be time for both of you to leave. She’s been through more than enough already.”

“I know,” Robin said. “I’m sorry.”

The apology tripped Vickie up, literally and figuratively. She stumbled, her purposeful stride breaking, as she blinked, wide-eyed, up at Robin for a long moment. “Oh. Uh. Well, good.” Another moment passed before Vickie wrangled up an “Apology accepted.”

Sensing a crack in Vickie’s armor, Nancy took her shot. She dug out Joey’s list of numbers—*prescription numbers*—from her bag and held it out to Vickie. “Do you recognize these?”

For a second, it really looked like Vickie wouldn’t take the paper from her. Finally, though—looking like it was going against every one of her better instincts—she did, peering down at the list with suspicious eyes.

Finally, she looked up again. “Where did you get this?”

Nancy wasn’t sure how to answer *that* question without opening the door to a lot of other questions that she *definitely* couldn’t answer. “That top number,” she said instead, “is one of Mrs. Taft’s prescriptions. Which means that the rest of the numbers on that list are prescriptions too.” She stepped forward, lowering her voice. “We need to know who they belong to.”

Vickie’s face paled. “You need to leave.”

“We just want to ask them a few questions,” Nancy pushed on, speaking quickly. “That’s it—just like with Mrs. Taft. And once we’re done, we won’t bother them again. And we won’t tell them where we got their names —”

“*Leave,*” Vickie insisted. Her gentle shepherding was more insistent now—actually, it was *physical*. She had one hand on Robin’s shoulder and

one on Nancy's and was shoving them backward, toward the front lobby. "I will seriously call security. I swear."

Nancy twisted out of Vickie's grasp, trying one more time. "You don't even have to tell us. We'll look it up ourselves, just show us where—"

"Hey, Nance?" Robin slapped a hand against Nancy's arm. "Could you just—"

Let me handle this, was the end of that sentence, the echo of what Robin had asked just minutes ago. Nancy had brushed her off before—but now, as she took in the mulish dislike on Vickie's face, she could only admit defeat. Grimacing at Robin, Nancy took a step back.

"We get it, okay?" Robin told Vickie, who still had one hand gripping Robin's denim jacket. "What we're asking is pretty out there."

" 'Out there'?" Vickie snorted. She seemed much more at ease talking to Robin than she had when Nancy was the one grilling her. "Try 'huge breach of privacy,' or 'actually illegal.' "

"Sure, absolutely, I'll try both of them," Robin said, nodding and nodding. "But—hey, can I say something? Before you kick us out on our asses?"

Vickie considered this. Her eyes kept flicking sideways to Nancy, before landing back on Robin. Nancy couldn't help but notice how much icier Vickie's gaze was when it was trained on her, and how much warmer it was when it returned to Robin. She tried not to be offended by this.

Vickie didn't say anything—but her hand dropped from Robin's shoulder. *Green light.*

"Okay," Robin breathed, not even bothering to mask her relief. "Then I'm just gonna start with—I know you're scared."

Vickie's eyes narrowed. "Of what?"

"Tons of stuff. I mean, *I'm* scared of like…a billion things." Robin blew out another breath. "We don't have time for the full list, but if you're looking for highlights: parrots, quicksand, anything involving Bela Lugosi —"

"Robin," Nancy interjected.

“But top in the rankings right now,” Robin said, “is just…this.” She waved at the hallway, the hospital—the *world* around her. “The current… state of everything. It just feels like everyone could disappear on us without even a second of warning, you know?”

Vickie nodded. Nancy thought she probably wasn’t even aware she was doing it.

Robin’s answering smile was sad. “It keeps me up at night, to tell you the truth,” she said, quieter than before—and Nancy wasn’t sure whether she was supposed to be hearing this, or if it was meant for Vickie alone. “Especially when I remember shit like—like Principal Higgins’s commencement speech. That long list of names. People we’ve lost.”

Vickie’s hand was back on Robin’s arm—comforting this time—and now Nancy noticed that Robin’s eyes were wet. She scrubbed a hand over her face, and when she emerged, she was smiling again. “Sorry,” Robin said. “It just gets me.”

“Me too,” Vickie said. “It’s why I’m doing this.” She looked down at the pink-and-white candy striper uniform she was wearing. “I want to help.”

“We want to help too,” Robin said. “It’s why we came to you.” Gently, she took Joey’s scrap of paper from Vickie and unfolded it in front of her, presenting her with the numbers. “I know you recognize these prescriptions. They were written right here in this hospital. Am I right?”

Another long moment stretched. Then Vickie’s chin dipped—just a half inch or so, but enough to be significant.

“And they wound up on the same list,” Robin said. “That means that they’re connected—to Mrs. Taft, to each other. And being connected to Mrs. Taft, the state she’s in? That’s not a good thing.” She inched toward Vickie as she spoke. But unlike Nancy’s stab at conspiratorial commiseration, Robin’s tack actually seemed to be working—or at least Vickie wasn’t actively threatening to have them arrested. “Something is making Hawkins sick. We want to figure out what that is. We want to stop it.” She pressed the list back into Vickie’s hands. “I’m not ready for this town to disappear on me yet. Are you?”

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Chapter Sixteen

It took Vickie forty-five minutes and some illicit snooping through the hospital pharmacy's records, but she came up with five names. She delivered these to Robin and Nancy in the hospital parking lot, glancing over her shoulder like she was smuggling treasonous government secrets on the half sheet of ripped-out notebook paper she pressed into Robin's hand.

"They've all got respiratory problems," she said, quiet and furtive. "Just like Mrs. Taft. And they all started turning up at the hospital within the last month or so. I think you might be onto something."

"Thank you," Robin said, tucking the paper into her jacket pocket. "I—we really owe you."

Vickie smiled up at her, looking only a little sick about what she'd just done. "Just…promise it'll be worth it?" she asked.

"Promise," Robin agreed.

Nancy, sitting behind the wheel of her station wagon, watched in the rearview mirror as Vickie turned and scurried back into the hospital. Then she watched Robin watching Vickie. Then she found herself thinking of Jonathan for some reason. Jonathan…and graduation…and the little smile he'd had on his face watching Robin and Vickie talk.

"What do we think?" Robin asked, sticking her head through the open window to show Nancy the list of names. "Mission accomplished?"

"Step one accomplished," Nancy corrected. "Now it's time for step two."

Step two was the phone book that Nancy had begged from the receptionist in the lobby on their way out the door. She opened it on the empty passenger seat, cross-referencing the names that Robin read aloud to

her with the recorded addresses. It didn't take long—no more than a couple of minutes—and by the time Nancy *thunked* the white pages closed again, she and Robin had a complete list of addresses.

"These two are kind of close together," Robin said, squinting down at *Matthew Barry, 182 Sycamore Street,* and *Bart Levoy, 87 Roane Avenue.* "East Hawkins. If we split up the list, I could check in on them on my bike and you could take the other three in your car."

Nancy fished her walkie-talkie from the back seat and waggled it at Robin. "Stay in touch?"

"Affirmative, Commander," Robin said with a little salute. She patted her backpack, which presumably contained her own walkie. "Private Buckley will report in at twenty hundred."

Nancy bit back a smile. "See that you do, soldier." She cranked the engine on her car, and Robin stepped away from the window, sidling toward her bike in the rack in front of the hospital.

The first name on Nancy's list was on the near west side of town, in the shadowy ruins of the Starcourt Mall. Nancy drummed her fingers on the steering wheel as she drove, unable to sit still. There was that electric thrill thrumming through her again, the one that told her she was onto something, that she held a puzzle piece she hadn't had an hour ago.

She was so wrapped up in her own excitement that she nearly ran a red light. Quick reflexes saved her—she slammed on the brakes just in time to avoid getting T-boned by a minivan.

Nancy sat in the adrenaline spike of that near-miss for a second, masochistically enjoying the drumbeat of her heart in her ears. *They're not going to move before you get there,* she told herself. *Chill out*.

But it was hard to deny the feeling of *forward momentum*. The sensation was almost addictive. It felt better than anything she'd experienced in months, and she just wanted to chase it to the end of the line.

I should have told Robin that she did a good job, she realized when the light turned green and she eased her car into gear. *We'd never have gotten these names from Vickie without her*.

But there was one sour little chord singing in the midst of Nancy's victory. A single phrase that kept playing over and over again in her mind.

It keeps me up at night.

Those words stuck in Nancy's mind. She couldn't shake them, just like she couldn't ignore the tears that had sprung into Robin's eyes. She knew what it meant, of course. Robin was terrified of losing somebody else. *We all are,* Nancy told herself. So why did the memory scrape at something deep in her core?

But there was no time to interrogate that any further. She had arrived at *Deidre Washington, 8372 Garnet Road*. Nancy turned off her car and climbed out.

Deidre Washington's house was a well-maintained split-level on a spacious green corner lot. Immaculate white trim framed the front door. Matching trim had been fitted to the Tudor windows, somehow making what should have been an incongruous style feel…inevitable. It was a quirky, quaint gingerbread house of a building, and Nancy—who had never once cared about architecture in her life—found herself charmed.

Charmed…until she slid her gaze to the end of the block. There, it was easy to see the military-issue steel plates that scabbed over the Rift's glowing red surface.

Is it really that simple? she wondered. *You live closer to a Rift, you get sick*? It would make sense. Nobody really knew what horrible gases and spores were vomiting through from the Upside Down, much less what those things could do to a person via long-term exposure.

But if it's the Rift, then why isn't everyone on this block getting sick? Why aren't we all *getting sick? Why these six people?*

With this question itching in the back of Nancy's mind, she padded up the walkway and knocked at the front door.

Deidre Washington was a woman about Wilhelmina Taft's age, with the oxygen canister and nose cannula to match. She answered Nancy's inquiries into the onset of her illness, her level of contact with the other people on Vickie's list, and her symptoms themselves with patience, oatmeal raisin cookies, and quickly fading energy. By the time Nancy was gathering her

bag and stepping back out of the house, Deidre was already shuffling herself to bed, and Nancy had been left with no more answers than she'd had twenty minutes before.

The walkie in her bag sputtered to life. "Hey, Nance—do you copy?"

Nancy scrambled to respond. "Yeah, I'm here. Just got out of Mrs. Washington's house."

"Find anything?"

"No." Nancy unlocked her car and opened the door, leaning on the doorframe as she talked. "It sounds like she got sick around the same time that Mrs. Taft did. Similar symptoms too. But I don't think it's any kind of illness. Not the kind that would be spread from person to person. Mrs. Washington says that she barely leaves her house." She sighed. "How about you?"

"Same. I mean, Mr. Levoy said about ten words to me the entire time we were talking, but they were very efficient words." Nancy could hear effort in Robin's voice. It sounded like she was climbing back on her bicycle. "To tell you the truth, Nance, I don't think I've ever had a bigger bummer of a conversation in my whole life. Mr. Levoy's just such a normal guy, you know? And this—Hawkins bullshit happens to him anyway. Like, he reminds me of my grandpa." Another grunt—Robin was starting to pedal. "The whole *house* is normal. Four walls, chimney, roof, a little patio setup. It's nice, actually. Like, really nice. Outside of being close enough to the Rift to hear the Demobats—*Jesus*, this hill can suck a—"

"We'll have to keep looking," Nancy said, cutting into the signal before she could hear whatever colorful word Robin was going to use to finish that sentence. "There's got to be something to link them. We'll figure it out."

"You sound—so sure—" came Robin's panting response from the other end of the line.

"Joey knew what it was," Nancy said. She slipped back into her car, slamming the door shut. "It's there. All we have to do is catch up."

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Chapter Seventeen

Despite Nancy's assertions, when she pulled into her driveway two hours later, her hands were emptier than her gas tank. Each of their visits had been more unproductive than the last, with Nancy's final doorbell ring resulting in nothing more than the door being slammed in her face. It turned out that sick people weren't always the most open to speaking to the press.

She tried to get a handle on her dejection as she slumped toward her front door, fixing what could maybe, in the dark, pass for a cheery smile onto her face. Inside, she found both Mike and her father holed up in the den in front of the television, watching some rerun of *Saturday Night Live*. They barely looked up as Nancy hung up her jacket, which wasn't strange in and of itself. But there was an atmosphere of grumpy solidarity radiating between the two of them that Nancy had never seen before.

"Hi," she said, prompting. "I'm back." She glanced around. "Where are __"

"Your sister's in bed," her dad said, grouchiness dripping from his voice. "And your mother is in the kitchen."

Nancy glanced over to Mike. "Oh…kay…"

"They kicked us out," Mike said, sounding exactly like their dad.

" 'They'?"

" '*No boys allowed,*' " Dad groused. "It's my damn house."

Whatever was going on here, Nancy was starting to think that it might be extremely funny. A little of her gloomy fog lifted. "Who's 'they'?"

"That Georgia lady," Mike said.

“She and your mother are ‘catching up,’ ” said Dad, and if his tone was anything to go off of, he was halfway to believing that the two women were conspiring to commit treason against the American government.

And if that was the case, then Nancy had to at least try to get the scoop. “I should say hi,” she said, already drifting in the direction of the kitchen.

“Get me a Sprite while you’re in there?” Mike called after her, pitiful, but Nancy was already gone.

When she stepped into the kitchen, she found her mother and Georgia Miller settled in chairs at the kitchen table, an open bottle of wine sitting between them. By the orange light of the overhead lights, Nancy could see that the bottle was already two-thirds empty. The two women were laughing as she walked toward them, rocking back in their seats as their shoulders shook.

Mom heard Nancy’s footsteps before she turned to see who was approaching. “Uh-uh,” she said, waving a hand in Nancy’s direction. “I told you, this is a girl’s club tonight.”

“Karen.” Georgia swatted at her friend’s arm, directing her attention toward Nancy. She was dressed for comfort in a pair of cuffed and faded jeans, a washed-out Boston University sweatshirt, and white Reeboks that had seen better days.

“Oh—oh!” Mom’s eyes lit up as she realized that Nancy was their visitor. She scooted her chair around, opening up toward her daughter. “Hi, sweetheart—I didn’t know when you were going to be back tonight.”

“Hi, Mom. Hey.” Nancy gave Georgia a wave. “Looks like you guys are having fun.”

“Come on, sit,” Georgia said. Using her toe, she shoved one of the empty chairs out from beneath the table.

Nancy regarded it for a moment, suddenly not quite sure of where to go from there. It felt, for some reason, like she’d never encountered a chair before. But no. It wasn’t that. It was the fact that—it felt like Georgia was inviting her to join some kind of club. Welcoming her to the grown-ups’ table for the first time.

You're eighteen, she told herself. *You* are *a grown-up*. Hadn't that been the crux of the whole speech she'd delivered to Joey Taft's friends?

But there was a difference between saying it, and this: having the door opened for her to the world of fully adult women. It was…big. Weirdly big.

Nancy sat down. She caught the edge of her mother's soft smile in profile.

"I still can't believe it's been so long since I've been back," Georgia said. She was watching Nancy with a melancholic expression. "Almost eighteen years. You were so small. Now you're so big."

Nancy gave an apologetic little shrug. "Sorry?"

"Georgia was commenting on how much has changed in Hawkins since she left," Mom said.

"Or how little," Georgia said. "Even after an earthquake like *that*. Even with all the destruction and tragedy. This town sometimes feels like it's stuck in time."

"Melvald's was a soda shop when we were kids," Mom said. "We didn't have a Radio Shack. We didn't have a mall."

"We still don't have a mall," Nancy muttered.

"It's a *feeling*. That's all I'm saying," Georgia said. "Like nothing has ever happened to this town, even though so much has."

"Is that why you said what you said at graduation?" Nancy asked. "In your speech? '*Hawkins will get through this.*'"

A complicated look crossed Georgia's face. "Yes," she finally said. "For better or for worse, at the end of the day—Hawkins stays standing."

A short silence lingered in the wake of Georgia's words. Everyone at the table seemed lost in thought, weighing the implications of that statement.

But just as she'd brought the heavy moment down on them, Georgia was the one to lift it. "Ah, don't listen to me," she said. "We're here to have a fun night, not to…cry into our Chardonnay. So." She propped her chin on the rim of her wineglass, swiveling her gaze toward Nancy. "Nancy, any *boys* in your life?"

"Georgia!" Mom smacked her friend's arm. "Why are you interrogating her?"

Georgia cackled. “She did it to me!”

Nancy faked an affronted squawk. “That was for the *Post*!”

“And I bet it’ll be an incredible profile. But come on. I’m a single forty-something who spends her days arguing with construction foremen. Let me live vicariously through you. Boys?”

“Boy,” Nancy corrected. “One. Singular.”

“A boyfriend?” If Nancy wasn’t imagining things, then the glance that Georgia shot toward Mom had a tinge of worry in it. “Oh my. That sounds serious.” She said *serious* in the same way people did when they were talking about cancer.

“It is,” Nancy said, a little defiant. “His name is Jonathan. We’ve been together about a year and a half.”

“Well, that’s wonderful,” Georgia said. “And it sounds a bit familiar. Karen, weren’t you and Ted together by graduation as well?”

Next to Nancy, Mom took a deep gulp of wine. “Mhm,” she hummed.

“But you’re—still going to Emerson in the fall?” Georgia asked the question with delicacy. Nancy could almost see her brain churning behind her eyes, carefully choosing each word before it was delivered to her mouth. “Right?”

Despite the gingerliness of Georgia’s wording, the question still sent Nancy’s stomach roiling. *We’ll find him. I’ll find him*. She repeated the mantra to herself.

She realized, with a pang, that she hadn’t touched her registration packet for days—not since Jonathan’s visit. She hadn’t even *thought* about it. She’d been so wrapped up in chasing down the Joey Taft story that college hadn’t so much as crossed her mind.

“I’m going,” Nancy said. “Absolutely.” Then in defiance of—she didn’t even *know* what, she added, “Jonathan was too.”

Georgia’s eyebrows shot upward. “Was?”

“More wine?” Mom offered. Georgia slid her glass across the table to be filled.

The roiling in Nancy’s stomach was, if anything, only getting worse. She couldn’t shake the feeling that she’d slipped up, somehow, even though

she was only telling the truth. “He…”

Georgia’s eyes were suddenly full of concern. “You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to. I really shouldn’t be prying, I’m sorry—”

“No, no,” Nancy hurried to say. “It’s not that. Just—” She blew out a breath, sagging back in her chair. “We were supposed to go to Emerson together. But he—he had to back out. His family’s been having a hard time finding a place to live, ever since the earthquake, and I think—I *know* that he’d never be able to live with himself if he left Hawkins without knowing that they were safe and settled.” She gave Georgia a lopsided smile. “He’s a good guy like that.”

“He sounds like it.” Again, Georgia’s phrasing was careful, but this time Nancy didn’t think it was because there was something she was trying *not* to say. Instead, she could see that Georgia’s gaze was distant, fixed on some point behind Nancy.

The reason why imminently became clear. “You know,” Georgia said slowly, “there are a lot of houses in Hawkins that Hearth & Home has fixed up.”

Nancy frowned. “Aren’t there people living in them?”

“Not all.” Georgia took a sip of her wine. “You see this kind of thing again and again in places that have been hit by natural disasters. People whose homes have been damaged—especially if they’ve been damaged badly—think, at first, let’s get the place fixed up. Let’s try to get back to normal. But then, when they can move back in, they realize there are too many bad memories tied up in it—the walls, the attic, the freaking shag carpeting. So they move.” She shrugged. “I can think of a handful of houses like that here in Hawkins, just off the top of my head. Empty, but fixed up. Good as new. Pristine.”

“If you do say so yourself,” teased Mom, and the two women once again descended into cackles.

Nancy heard their laughter through a fog. Her thoughts had gotten snagged on Georgia’s words. “*Fixed up. Good as new. Pristine*.” They jogged something in her recent memory—a random fact that she’d noted at the time, but hadn’t known what to make of.

Pristine. Deidre Washington's house had been pristine. Especially in comparison to her neighbor's. And Robin had made a point to mention Mr. Levoy's patio. *It's nice, actually. Like, really nice.*

Now that Nancy thought about it, every house she'd visited this afternoon had been picture-perfect. Shockingly so, given their respective proximities to the Rift. They should have been damaged, if not reduced to total rubble.

A snapshot sprung from the well of Nancy's recollection, crystal-clear. The image of an all-American family, their contentment preserved forever on the sign outside of Joey Taft's house.

Saving Towns. Changing Lives.

The next inhale that Nancy took felt like ice. She looked up at Georgia's face across the table.

Could *Hearth & Home* be the common denominator linking these illnesses across Hawkins? Could they be the reason that Joey had wound up dead?

Could Georgia?

She forced herself to take another frozen breath, fighting through the spike in her adrenaline. She knew herself—knew how her impulses could get the better of her—and Nancy couldn't just plunge ahead on this theory this time.

Because you want to be careful? Or because you don't want to believe that it's true?

She shoved that thought to the back of her mind, fixing a smile on her face. She hoped that it didn't look too sick.

"I should head up to bed," she said, pushing back from the table.

"Oh, no, stay," Georgia wheedled, setting her glass back down. "I swear, I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. I promise, I won't bring up the boyfriend situation again."

"No, that's totally fine," Nancy said, standing. "It's just been a long day. I'm exhausted."

"Sleep well, sweetheart," Mom said, paving over Georgia's protestations. "I'll see you in the morning."

“Night,” Nancy said, giving them both a little wave.

I need confirmation, she thought as she padded back out of the kitchen. *Proof. I need to know if H&H really worked on each of these properties. And if they did—then I need to find out what they’re really up to.*

I need to get into the Hearth & Home offices.

Georgia’s purse was dangling from the coat hook next to the door, right where Nancy had just hung up her jacket. With a furtive glance over her shoulder, Nancy saw that her father and Mike were both still parked in front of the television, absorbed by the antics of Gilda Radner. Moving slowly, Nancy slipped her hand into Georgia’s purse. After a moment of fumbling, she hooked her fingertip through a key ring. Clutching the keys so that they wouldn’t jingle, she snuck them out, palming them. Then she tromped up the stairs and into her bedroom.

As soon as the door was shut, Nancy was darting around her bed and snatching up her phone. She wasted no time in dialing the Buckleys.

Thankfully, Robin was the one who picked up. “Buckley residence, Robin speaking.”

“Robin,” Nancy whispered. She was already hoisting open her bedroom window, preparing to make her exit. “I think I have a lead. How do you feel about a little breaking and entering?”

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Chapter Eighteen

Like everything else in Hawkins, Hearth & Home's headquarters was a ghost town once night fell. Robin kept one nervous eye on the road behind them as Nancy huddled by the front doors, fumbling through the keys that she'd swiped from Georgia's purse. "How's it coming?" Robin asked Nancy over her shoulder, bouncing on the balls of her feet. "Because I gotta tell you, it usually doesn't take me this long to get through a door."

Nancy tried another key in the lock. It didn't budge. "Getting there."

"Do you think that, the shadier a person is, the more keys they just *accumulate*?" Robin chattered. Nancy tried to tune her out, plucking the next key from the ring and sliding it into the lock. "Like, if Georgia Miller *wasn't* potentially poisoning an entire town full of people, maybe her key ring would be…svelte."

"Svelte?"

"Pared back. Minimal."

Nancy twisted the key. This time, the lock clicked open. She shot a small smile back over her shoulder at Robin. "That's definitely a theory."

As eerily silent as it was out on the street, it was somehow eerier and more silent inside the offices of H&H. Every footstep was a thunderclap against the linoleum tiles and the bare walls, and the low-level thrum of Nancy's nerves only made the sound echo louder.

"Jeez, this place is bleak," Robin whispered, eyes wide in the dark. "You'd think a construction company would care more about, like, aesthetics. Would it kill them to throw up a poster?"

"Maybe some bad motel artwork?" Nancy offered, leading the way to the still-illuminated STAIRS sign that pointed upward.

Robin snorted. “Yeah, let’s get some watercolors up. I can see it now.” She gestured widely, windmilling an arm at one of the bland beige walls. “Two tiny sailboats on the ocean here. A bucket of seashells and a sandcastle there. Would really bring the vision of this place together.”

She was chattering to cover her anxiety, but that suited Nancy just fine—and it was better to listen to someone else’s nonsense thoughts than be forced to listen to her own. “Why the beach theme?”

“Sun, sea, surf. It’s the total opposite of Lockdown, Indiana,” Robin said, following Nancy as she started up the steps. “Don’t you ever want to forget we’re here?”

They emerged onto the second-floor landing and made straight for Georgia’s office. The door was locked when Nancy tried the handle, but this time, she found the right key on the second try.

“Thank God,” Robin muttered from somewhere over Nancy’s shoulder.

Nancy swung the door open and stepped into the office.

The room was tidy and as bare-bones as the rest of the building. The girls surveyed the imposing row of file cabinets.

Robin whistled. “That’s a…lot of drawers.” She cautiously pulled open the nearest drawer, peering at the top folder inside. “Looks like this is about some school they rebuilt in…California?”

If this was the full scope of every project Hearth & Home had ever taken on, then weeding out the Hawkins-specific addresses was going to be even more difficult than Nancy had anticipated. “Are they alphabetized, at least?” Nancy asked.

“By what?” The glance that Robin shot her was bleak. “Street? Town? Building owner?”

Okay. Then they’d have to be procedural about this. “How about this,” Nancy said, trotting to the end of the bank of cabinets. “I’ll start here. You start down there.”

Robin nodded. “We meet in the middle.”

“If you find any of the people on this list”—Nancy waved the roster of names that Vickie had given them—“or actually, scratch that. If you find

any of the properties that H&H has worked on here in Hawkins, write it down."

They got to work, the oppressive silence of the H&H building vanishing under the shuffle of papers and the creaking of metal drawers as Robin and Nancy dug into the files. It was slow going—the only light was the moonlight filtering through the windows, since turning on the overhead fluorescents would be asking for trouble and even breaking out a flashlight felt like too big of a risk. Nancy forced herself to keep track of time as she read, because the minutes threatened to disappear, unnoticed, in an endless blur of names, places, and numbers.

Which was why she knew that it had been exactly twenty minutes since slipping through the office doors when she came across the first name on Vickie's list. *Deidre Washington. 8372 Garnet Road.*

Finding the file felt like a slap to the face. Nancy realized, in that moment, that she'd been hoping against hope that her hunch was wrong—that H&H hadn't really been the missing link between these sick people that she'd been looking for. But there was no arguing with the manila folder in front of her—or with the schematics inside, the ones that mapped out each area of the house that was due for repair and renovation.

She forced herself to speak up. "Got one."

"Me too," Robin said. She was kneeling on the floor a few yards away, the contents of a bottom drawer spread out around her. Her confirmation didn't do much to ease the sick angst in Nancy's stomach. "I think you might be onto something, Nance."

Nancy just nodded, returning her focus to her work. She didn't trust herself to speak—not with the dreadful disappointment inside of her already desperate for a way out.

One hour later, the two girls had hunted down every property on Vickie's list. They'd also made note of a couple dozen more addresses—buildings in Hawkins where Hearth & Home had either undertaken construction, or was planning to in the coming weeks.

"Jesus," Robin said, sagging against the cabinets as the final drawer closed behind her. She was scanning through their newly accumulated list

of names, regarding the paper like it might spontaneously combust. “You don’t think everyone in these buildings is sick, do you? Or going to get sick?”

“I…don’t know,” said Nancy. She’d been asking herself the same questions.

Robin hissed out a low breath. “Shit. Wait—what are you doing?”

Nancy had crossed to the rickety desk that had been haphazardly shoved against the far wall. “What are the odds we’re ever going to be able to get back in here?” she asked. “We have to take every opportunity we can get.” She slid open the top drawer. “Are you just going to stand there?”

Robin grumbled, but she was already trudging over. As Nancy unloaded the drawer’s contents out onto the desktop, Robin began to dig eagerly through them.

To-do lists. Renovation plans. Post-it notes of scribbled phone numbers. They all went into a pile Nancy had mentally labeled *Irrelevant.* The desk space she was hopefully reserving for a *Relevant* pile remained resolutely empty as the girls quickly made their way through the nooks and crannies of the desk, until—

Nancy’s head shot up. “What was that?”

Robin, who had just slammed the last drawer shut, froze in place, her hand still on the handle. “What was what?”

“There was a sound. Didn’t you hear that?” Robin just blinked at Nancy as she scurried to Robin’s shoulder. “When you closed the drawer. There was a sound. Like, a rattle. Do it again.”

Obligingly, Robin opened the drawer and banged it closed. Sure enough, something in the depths of the desk shook with a faint rattle, loud enough for Robin to hear. “Weird,” she said, opening the drawer again and peering inside. “It’s empty.”

“Maybe…” Nancy felt around inside the drawer. Sure enough, the tip of one finger snagged on a tiny cloth loop that was shoved up against the top of the drawer, well out of sight for anyone who wasn’t looking for it. She hooked it around her nail and dragged it forward—taking the false back of the drawer along with it.

“If you say *voilà*, then I’ll know you’ve been spending too much time around Steve,” Robin deadpanned in the face of Nancy’s victorious smile.

“He doesn’t say *voilà*. He says *wah-lah*, and that isn’t even—”

“A word. I know. I keep telling him that. And you’re not helping your case.” Robin slapped Nancy’s shoulder. “So quit messing around already. What’s inside?”

The first thing Nancy withdrew from the revealed compartment was an unmarked cassette tape, obviously the source of the rattling sound. Nancy passed the tape to Robin before going back for the sheaf of papers that had been stashed there as well, rolled up so that they’d fit into the cramped space. Nancy spread them out, holding them up to the moonlight to make out the words printed on them.

“They’re…bank statements,” she said. “Records of transactions. Between Hearth & Home and…” She turned the paper over, scrutinizing it. “And nobody, it doesn’t say.”

Robin frowned. “Maybe construction materials? Drywall, lumber, that kind of thing?”

“Why would H&H be getting paid if they’re the ones buying that stuff?”

Robin held up the cassette, shaking it in its case. “Maybe this is how we find out.”

Ever since taking the job at *The Hawkins Post*, Nancy had never gone anywhere without her tape recorder. Taking it out of her purse, she slipped the cassette inside, rewound to the beginning, and hit play. For a long moment, there was nothing but faint static. Nancy fiddled with the volume, wondering if it was an issue with the tape recorder. She was just about to give up hope when—

“I’m not gonna say anything.”

Robin’s fingers tightened on the edge of the desk. She looked like she’d seen a ghost—or, more precisely, like she’d *heard* a ghost. Because the voice filtering out of Nancy’s tape recorder, even thick with static as it was, was unmistakably that of Joey Taft.

There was the sound of something shifting, most likely whatever device had been used to record Joey. Nancy realized, as she listened more closely,

that the reason he sounded so faint and scratchy was because he was speaking through a phone receiver. *His call had been recorded.*

"I don't even need to know why, okay?" Joey went on from beyond the grave.

"Kid—" The next voice they heard, clear of static, was Georgia's, cutting into Joey's panicked rambling.

But Joey hadn't let that stop him. "You guys did this to my grandma," he said, bulldozing through Georgia's protest. "You made her sick, so I'm asking you—no, I'm telling you, pay for her treatments. Pay for her treatments and no one has to know about this."

"Oh, Joey," Robin murmured.

Nancy shook her head. *Poor bastard.*

If Georgia's tone on the recording was any indication, she shared the girls' feelings. "You don't want to get into this, kid," she said. "If you hang up and walk away, we can keep this conversation between us. Like it never happened."

But that warning seemed to only strengthen Joey's resolve. "Help my grandma," he said, firmer this time. "And…stop making this town sick. We've—we've got enough to deal with, okay? So don't kill us on top of it." There was a long beat, and even though the conversation was being recorded on Georgia's end of the line, it was Joey's harsh breathing that was audible, staticky and rough. "Well?" he prompted.

In response, the line went dead. So did the recording. And, after an unidentifiable amount of time, so did Joey.

Nancy and Robin shared a horrified look. "Blackmail?" Robin asked, disbelieving. "He tried to blackmail Georgia—Hearth & Home."

"Or whatever," Nancy said, looking down at the bank statements in her hands.

"So is that it, then?" Robin went on, sounding curiously choked. "Case closed? Joey Taft threatens a *major, beloved,* and *extremely national* nonprofit without telling anyone else, and then winds up dead because of it? That's so—" She broke off, and Nancy realized that the emotion throttling Robin's voice was *anger*.

“He told someone,” Nancy said, squeezing Robin’s arm. “He told you. He told *us*. And we’re going to make sure that these bastards—”

The overhead lights flickered on.

Nancy’s first instinct was to frown at Robin. “What did you—” She stopped when common sense caught up to her.

The light switch was next to the door. And Robin was standing beside Nancy. On the other side of the room. Staring in horror at something over Nancy’s shoulder.

“Um,” Robin stammered as the blood in Nancy’s veins turned to ice. It took every bit of self-composure she had to force herself to turn around—and give a sickly smile to Georgia Miller, framed in the doorway.

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Chapter Nineteen

The *creak* as Nancy's fingers tightened on the notepad was almost—but not entirely—imperceptible. She forced herself to loosen her grip before she damaged it. "Uh—Georgia. Hi."

Georgia crossed her arms. In the greenish fluorescent light, Nancy could see just how dark the circles were under her eyes.

"I thought I'd left my keys at the office," Georgia said, as flat as Nebraska. "Is this the part where you tell me you're just here to return them?"

A million excuses whirled through Nancy's mind, each one worse than the last. *Tyler told me to let myself in. I was doing research for your feature. I got lost on my way to the bathroom.*

But Georgia's unimpressed stare made it clear she'd see through any flimsy explanation Nancy could come up with. And even if that hadn't been the case—there was really only one answer to her question.

Nancy squared her shoulders. She took Georgia's keys out of her bag and tossed them over to her. "No."

"Nancy," Robin whispered. Nancy didn't look at her.

"If that's true," Georgia said, pocketing her keys, "then can you tell me why I shouldn't be on the phone with Hawkins PD right now?"

Nancy lifted her chin—but before she could respond, Robin was stepping in front of her. "Easy, okay?" she said. "Let's go easy with the threats. Because we might not have a totally awesome reason for how we got in here tonight—but before you start dialing up Chief Powell and the Army and the—the freaking FBI or whatever." She held up the tape

recorder. “Why don’t you tell us what the hell you were doing talking to Joey Taft just a couple days before he was *murdered*.”

At the sight of the tape recorder, every last remaining scrap of expression evaporated off of Georgia’s face. She went as still as a statue, her expression a mask of emotionless marble. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Georgia, come *on*,” Nancy said. “We listened to the tape. We heard your voice. We just want answers.” Placing a hand on Robin’s shoulder, Nancy moved the other girl back, putting space between her and Georgia. “Joey knew, right? He knew…that something H&H is doing…is hurting people. We’ve seen them. Talked to them—the people who are getting sick. Every single one lives in a house that was repaired by Hearth & Home.”

It might have been Nancy’s imagination, but she almost thought there was a crack forming in Georgia’s stony mask. “Joey—” she began, but then her mouth was snapping shut again, biting back whatever she had been on the verge of saying.

“What?” Robin prodded. “Joey *what*? Joey figured out what you were up to…and you had him killed? Is that it?”

“*No*,” Georgia said, hurt blazing from her eyes. “I never would have—*no*.”

“Then *what*, Georgia?” Nancy said. “Help me understand. Help both of us. Because there’s something going on here, something that Hearth & Home is all tangled up in. All we want is the full picture.” When Georgia only tightened her jaw, Nancy brandished the bank statements. “Fine. If you won’t talk about Joey, then how about *these*?”

Stalking forward, Georgia ripped the papers out of Nancy’s hand. “You have to leave.”

“But—”

“*Now*,” Georgia said. There was something boiling behind that word—not frustration, not rage, not fury…

It was *fear*. Hot, molten *fear*, so incendiary it lit Georgia up from the inside. Nancy took an involuntary step back, stumbling into Robin.

“Ms. Miller,” Robin said, steadying Nancy. “If you tell us what’s going on…we can help. I know it might seem ridiculous, but we’ve dealt with crazy shit before. Crazier than anything you’re mixed up in. I’d be willing to bet my life on it.”

But Georgia just stepped aside, clearing the path toward the open door. “Leave through the back.” She wouldn’t look them in the eye. “Don’t contact me again. You can write…whatever you want about me for the paper, Nancy. But don’t come back here. Don’t ever come back here.”

“Georgia—”

Georgia shook her head. Her eyes were fixed on the scuffed linoleum floor. And even though Nancy wanted nothing more than to keep pushing—

“Nancy. Come on.”

Robin nabbed Nancy’s elbow, giving it a gentle tug. “What are you doing?” Nancy demanded as Robin attempted to shepherd her toward the door. “I still have questions.”

But Robin was unrelenting. “Georgia’s made it pretty clear she’s not going to be answering shit. I think we should leave before we waste any more of her time.”

“Thank you, Miss Buckley,” Georgia said, and it was the stubborn set of her shoulders—a posture Nancy had seen in the mirror a million times—that finally convinced Nancy there was nothing left to be done here.

She stormed past Georgia and out of the office, hot on Robin’s heels.

“Robin—hey, Robin,” she whispered, heated, as soon as the door shut behind her. “Can you stop for a minute?”

But Robin just shook her head. “Uh-uh.” Her pace didn’t slow.

“What the *hell*?” Nancy demanded. “We’re not *seriously* going to leave, are we? There’s no way she had nothing to do with what happened to Joey. She could be the lead that we need.”

There was an illuminated EMERGENCY EXIT sign in the shape of an arrow at the end of the hall. Robin followed it and shoved through a blank metal door, revealing a cinder block stairwell. “Sure,” she said.

There was no way Nancy was going to make it through tonight without blowing a fuse. “So you just don’t care? Joey was *your friend*, Robin. Five

minutes ago, it seemed like you were ready to punch Georgia's lights out over him—and now you're running, just because she told you to?" She had to concentrate to match Robin's speed—the stairs were flying under Robin's feet so fast that they barely made a sound as she plunged down them.

"We don't need to stay," was Robin's only answer.

"We don't—*what*?!" The blank cement walls amplified the shriek in Nancy's voice, and she did her best to dial it down. "We just left her in an office that's *full of evidence*. She's probably destroying it all as we speak. We should at least have called the police before she lit up her document bonfire or whatever the hell she's doing up there."

They had reached the bottom of the staircase. Robin plunged through the door and stepped out into the muggy June night, huffing an internal little laugh. "No, we shouldn't have."

Nancy Wheeler was many things, but she was not an idiot. There was something going on here—something she hadn't picked up on yet. "Okay. Fine. We shouldn't have." She let the door lean against her shoulder, keeping it open. "Now tell me why. Or I'm going to turn around, walk right back into Georgia's office, and start getting some answers."

"She's not gonna tell us anything, Nancy," Robin said. "Whatever's going on here, it's got her practically pooping her pants. She's so freaked out that she's not thinking clearly. You know how I know that?"

"Enlighten me."

"Because." Robin plucked Nancy's tape recorder out of her pocket and popped it open. Moonlight glinted off the cassette tape that was still lodged inside. *Joey Taft's plea for help*.

"Holy crap." Nancy grabbed the tape, staring down at it in disbelief. Part of her was convinced it would evaporate as soon as she touched it, but reality seemed inclined to stand firm, at least for now, so she held the cassette with both hands, clutching it to her chest. "You stole this?"

"Eh?" Robin tugged the ends of her hair, looking a little nervous at the thought. "I mean. Georgia knew I had it. Is it stealing if she just…forgot to take it back?"

“Yeah,” Nancy said absently, still obsessively turning the cassette over and over in her hands.

Robin grimaced. “Great. I’m a thief. One more thing to hide from my parents.”

But Nancy wasn’t listening. *I need to make a copy of this,* she thought. *Or two. More. Hide them, in case Georgia and…whoever she’s working with come looking.* “This is exactly what we needed,” she told Robin.

Her mind was whirling, shuffling through all the possibilities that hadn’t existed an hour ago—that hadn’t even existed five minutes ago.

Which was when the gunshot rang out.

Robin jumped. Nancy yelped. It was only instinct that had her grabbing for the closing door they’d just left through, ready to dive inside if they needed cover. She caught it just before it could lock them out in the wide-open, *exposed* lot behind the building.

“Was that—?” Robin whispered over the resonating echoes.

“Uh-huh,” Nancy said. Her ears were still buzzing.

“What do we—”

“*Shh.*” Because there was another sound now—not gunfire, but the unmistakable *thump* of…a door closing? Followed by pounding footsteps—not on asphalt or cement but on linoleum.

Whoever just fired that gun did it *inside the building.*

“Georgia,” Nancy whispered. Then she was shoving the cassette into her jacket pocket, yanking the door open, and sprinting inside.

Robin caught on a moment later. “Shit,” she swore, taking off after Nancy. They raced back the way they’d just come, taking the steps two at a time. Nancy’s breath was thick in her lungs, burning in and burning out and burning in again until—they were at the door to the second landing. Nancy reached for the handle, only for Robin to grab her wrist, holding her back.

“They might still be in there,” Robin whispered, eyes big under the dim office lights.

Right. Nancy forced herself to stop, to think, to take a complete breath. Once she had more of a handle on her surging adrenal system, she nodded

her assurance at Robin. *I'm good.* Then she eased the door open a crack, barely wide enough for her to peer through.

The hall was empty. At the end of it, the door to Georgia's office stood open, but the lights inside had been turned out. Nancy couldn't make out anything in the darkness beyond. She squinted, doing her best to focus—

Downstairs, the front door banged shut.

Again, Robin jumped, but this time Nancy was able to muffle her yelp against her palm. "I think—" Robin was shaking. "I think…they might be gone."

And then there was another noise—softer, higher, unmistakably human. It had come from somewhere in the darkness beyond the open office door. That was enough of a green light for Nancy. Setting her mouth in a grim line, she stepped out into the hall, speeding toward Georgia's office, lurking gunmen be damned.

She smelled the blood before she saw it—and not for the first time, Nancy wished she'd lived a life where that scent wasn't instantly identifiable. Dread sank in her gut and dragged through her veins. It took every ounce of willpower in her body to reach out and flick on the light switch.

"Jesus *Christ,*" Robin cried, and Nancy could only agree with the sentiment. The opposite wall was splattered with so much blood that it looked like a macabre Jackson Pollack painting. It splashed all the way up to the ceiling, pooled in puddles on the carpeted floor. It streaked across the top of the battered old desk.

And then there was Georgia.

She was propped against the wall, arms and legs flung wide. A child's discarded rag doll. Nancy could envision it clearly. Georgia had been backing away from the door, backing away from someone standing in the exact place Nancy and Robin were standing now, when—

The bloody ruin of Georgia's chest gave a hideous, rattling heave, and Nancy almost crawled out of her own skin. "*Shit*."

"*Shit,*" Robin echoed, matching Nancy's horror. The two girls rushed forward, Nancy dropping to her knees at Georgia's side, heedless of the

gore soaking into her jeans. There was one spot on Georgia's shirt where the seeping blood seemed the thickest. Nancy pressed both hands there, kept pressure, and hoped for the best.

"I'll call an ambulance," Robin said, grabbing the desk phone out of its cradle and starting to dial. And when Nancy glanced back down at Georgia —

Her eyes were open. Just a millimeter, but *open*. And as Nancy fumbled for whatever words you were supposed to offer to someone who was fading away in front of you, Georgia found the strength to wrap her fingers around Nancy's wrist. Her lips opened. A trickle of blood ran out, but so did a near-inaudible whisper.

"Is she talking?" Robin asked, the phone pressed to her ear. "Nance, did she say something?"

"*Shh*." Nancy craned down, lowering her ear so close to Georgia's mouth that she could feel the faint whisper of the other woman's breath stirring her hair. "Georgia?"

"*T—t—*" Georgia's throat worked as she tried to force out the words, but her attempts were quickly overwhelmed by a rattling cough.

"It's okay. It's okay. Just rest, okay?" Nancy tried for a comforting pat on the shoulder before remembering that she was supposed to be keeping pressure on the gunshot wound. "We're getting help. You're gonna be fine."

"Nancy." Robin was surveying the desk with a scrutinizing stare. "I think…the bank documents are gone."

Nancy blinked up at her. Then around the rest of the office. Aside from the disturbing amount of blood, the room looked the same as it had when Nancy and Robin had left, just a few minutes before. "Gone?"

Robin nodded. But before she could elaborate, the 911 operator must have picked up on the other end of the line. "Hi, yes, I'm at the Hearth & Home offices on Watson?"

As Robin continued rattling off the details of their location and what had happened, Nancy's attention returned to the woman fading in front of her. "Georgia—hey, Georgia!" Nancy gave her a light shake. "Come on, stay awake. Stay awake, okay? Hey—"

Georgia’s fingers tugged Nancy’s wrist, turning her hand palm-up. Then she was pressing something into Nancy’s fingers.

A Hearth & Home business card?

Nancy stared at it, uncomprehending. “What? Why?”

Georgia just tapped the card, the blood on her fingers leaving a smear over the H&H motto. *Saving Towns. Changing Lives.*

“I don’t understand,” Nancy whispered. But when she looked up to Georgia’s eyes—

She found nothing. No spark. No life. No Georgia Miller. The CEO of Hearth & Home—Hawkins’s prodigal daughter—was gone.

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Chapter Twenty

It was well into the small hours of the morning by the time Nancy drove, bleary-eyed, back onto her street. In the wake of Georgia's death, the night had quickly morphed into a dizzy whirlwind of police and military interrogations. She and Robin had been seated side by side on the curb outside of the Hearth & Home offices, answering the same questions over and over again. *We were here to interview Georgia for* The Hawkins Post. *No, we didn't see anyone else. No, we don't know if anything might have been stolen. No, we have no idea why any of this happened.*

Nancy's throat was dry from the nonstop recitation. It was only once they'd been officially dismissed that one of the soldiers had offered them Dixie cups of tap water. Nancy had gulped hers down, and then regretted it when she noticed that Robin was using hers to wash most of the blood off of her hands.

She'd dropped Robin back off at her house. "You okay?" Nancy had asked, once they'd pulled to a stop in front of the Buckley family front walk.

Robin had grimaced. "No."

"Yeah."

With a terse nod, Robin had swung herself out of Nancy's car. Then she'd paused, leaning back in the open window. "Did you notice—those soldiers, the cops, everyone back at H&H? They didn't warn us not to leave town."

Nancy had grimaced, a pit opening in her stomach. "Where would we go?"

That pit was still gnawing at her as she pulled into her own driveway a few minutes later. Despite the late hour, she could see that there was still one lonely light glowing inside the house. Someone was awake in the kitchen.

Mom, Nancy thought. Her stomach gave another twist. Feeling dread start to take over, Nancy turned off the car's engine—

Something moved in her rearview mirror.

Nancy whipped around in her seat, peering out the back window. There was someone standing at the end of her driveway. The glow from the house's windows reduced the person to a silhouette, but there was something familiar about that shape—

The man in black.

He was here. He'd followed her to her house. What did he want?

Maybe he'd been the person who'd killed Georgia. Maybe he'd killed Joey too. Maybe he was here to add to his body count.

But something in that doom-spiral of thought rang hollow to Nancy. If this guy wanted to wipe her out, then he'd had plenty of chances to do it, in places that would make less of a scene than this one.

There was only one way to figure out what he wanted. Wiping her damp palms on her jeans, Nancy slowly climbed out of the car.

"You were with Georgia Miller tonight," is what he said, in lieu of a greeting.

Nancy tried not to think about the streaks of blood that were still crusting her skin. "What do you want?"

He stepped into the light. This close, with those awful aviators stowed away, Nancy could see that he was surprisingly young—late twenties, maybe early thirties. "I want to make sure you don't end up like her," he said.

There was a cushion around the edges of his voice, like he was padding it for her benefit. The thought irritated her. "Oh, okay." Nancy hoisted her purse farther up onto her shoulder, gripping the strap so hard that her knuckles whitened. "And you're doing that by…lurking in the shadows? Being a creep?"

He took another step toward her. She'd been expecting to find cold detachment in his gaze. Instead, she found desperation.

"You have no idea what kind of mess you're digging into, Miss Wheeler," he said, low and quick.

"I think I might," she told him. If this man was trying to soften his words, then she was trying to sharpen hers, hurling each syllable back into his face with a sharpshooter's aim. "What I'm struggling to wrap my head around is why the hell you think I would ever listen to a guy who shows up outside my house to give me ominous warnings. Especially when I don't even know that guy's name."

A long moment stretched in the wake of her outburst. Finally, the man unclenched his jaw enough to eke out, "Marquez."

That was something, at least. "Mr. Marquez? Dr. Marquez? Professor Marquez?" Nancy took a not-so-wild stab in the dark. "Agent Marquez?" There was a flicker in his eyes that told her she was right on the mark. "Which agency?"

"I told you my name," said Agent Marquez. "Now, will you promise to back off?"

"Agent Marquez," Nancy said, and watched that flicker in his eyes again. "I'm about to go inside and tell my mom that her childhood friend just died in front of me. It's going to suck. But it'll suck a little less if you tell me what you know about this story." He stared at her, flat-eyed, but she had his number now. She knew what flicker to look for. "You're not in Hawkins for vacation," she pressed on. "Nobody is. You know something about what happened to Georgia. To Joey. And maybe—maybe I'll have a better chance at getting out of this situation in one piece if you tell me."

There was that tell again, a softening in his eyes. For a moment, she thought her plea had worked. But then he shook his head, his expression shuttering once again. "I can't."

"Can't or won't, Agent Marquez?"

"*Can't.* I *told* you, Miss Wheeler. You don't know what kind of mess this is. It's bigger than you think, and deeper too. And the fewer people who go

around blabbing about it and asking questions, the better chance we'll all have. *Do you understand me?*"

He reminded her of Mike, in a weird way. It was the tone she could hear echoing up the basement stairs when her brother was leading his friends through a difficult D&D session. "*If you cast Fireball here, you'll wipe out Lucas. If you jump off that cliff, you're gonna die. If you fail this Charisma check, the king is gonna execute you. Do you understand me?*"

The thing was, no matter how serious Mike was when he asked that question, Nancy had never heard his friends back down. And sometimes a ranger got blasted off the face of the planet, and sometimes a rescue mission had to be launched into the king's dungeons…but that didn't mean that they hadn't heard Mike. That didn't mean that they hadn't understood him.

It just meant that they knew how the game was played. That risks sometimes needed to be taken. And that if someone was asking you that question…then you were on the track of something big.

"I understand you, Agent Marquez," Nancy said. "You're absolutely right. I'll stop poking around this."

"Is that a promise?" Marquez asked, and now that Nancy had heard Mike's voice in his once, she couldn't *stop* hearing it.

Which just meant it was that much easier to throw him an acquiescent smile as she stepped neatly toward her front door. "More than that," she called back to him. "It's a guarantee."

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Chapter Twenty-One

Nancy would never get used to the way the sun stubbornly insisted on rising no matter how traumatic the night before had been. She blearily squinted into the brilliant orange glow from her chair in the empty *Hawkins Post* bullpen, cheek plastered to her desk. There was a pen buried somewhere in her hair; she could feel the nib poking at her scalp. With a groan, Nancy sat upright, doing her best to tease it out.

She hadn't meant to fall asleep at her desk. But spending what little remained of the night in her own house had felt impossible after breaking the news of Georgia's death to her mother.

Mom had taken the news in stride, at least at first. She had just stared into space somewhere over Nancy's shoulder, her face half shrouded in the kitchen shadows. Then, without a word, she'd walked to the refrigerator, pulled out a bottle of wine, and poured herself a brimming glass.

"Mom—" Nancy had tried, but she'd fallen silent at the tiny shake of her mother's head.

"Go to bed, Nancy," she'd instructed her daughter. Her voice had only quavered a little on the last word. Then, her glass in hand, Mom had trudged up the stairs. A moment later, Nancy had heard the door to her parents' bedroom clicking shut. Then Nancy had been alone in the sleeping, grieving house.

Thirty minutes of pacing back and forth across the kitchen had convinced Nancy that there was no way in hell she'd have been able to get any rest within the suffocating walls of her own home—not with the memory of her mom's shattered expression swimming before her eyes, or

the echo of Agent Marquez's words in her ears. So after grabbing a change of clothes, Nancy had headed back out into the darkness.

Now, with the early morning sun warming her skin through the windows of *The Hawkins Post*, Nancy stretched, letting out a groan as the vertebrae in her back popped like Bubble Wrap.

"Late night?"

She was too tired to startle. Nancy just peered hazily into the supernova sunrise, making out the vague silhouette of Sean Pullman.

"You could say that."

He trudged toward her, transforming from a silhouette into a sleepy-eyed man carrying a thermos of coffee. "Don't tell me. You stumbled across another crime scene on your way home from study group?"

She could blame sleep deprivation on the fact that her first response was "I already graduated." Then her brain caught up with her. "Yes."

His coffee hadn't kicked in yet either, it seemed, because he just blinked for a second. "Huh?"

"There's been another murder," Nancy said. "Last night. Georgia Miller."

Sean stared at her for another long moment. He was frozen where he stood, icicle-still. "Georgia—"

"I found her in her office," Nancy said, reciting the same story that she'd told the authorities the night before. "I was going to do a follow-up interview for the piece you assigned me. But when I got there—"

"Jesus, kid." Sean walked around her desk and sank into the nearest chair—Marty Danvers's. Its wheels gave a protesting squeal, already on the edge of giving out after years of Marty's mistreatment. "You've got the worst luck of anyone I know."

"I've got a *story,*" Nancy said. The sleepy fog behind her eyes was making her reckless, but she couldn't bring herself to care. And anyway, they were alone in this office—even Corporal Young hadn't marched through the front door yet. "First Joey. Now Georgia. They're linked, Sean. I know they are."

Sean squinted at her. The sunlight that had blinded her was at her back now, warming and obscuring her. “How?”

It was exactly the question she’d been hoping that he would ask. Eagerly, Nancy flipped open her notebook. Inside were the scribbled names of the patients Vickie had given her—their addresses, the Rx numbers from Joey’s list. “Hearth & Home.”

She watched, breath bated, as Sean took the notebook from her and began to scan through what she’d gathered. “They’ve been doing something to the houses that they’ve renovated. Something that’s making people sick. Joey Taft was one of the first people to put the pieces together, after his grandmother wound up in the hospital with respiratory problems. But instead of going wide with the story, he tried to blackmail H&H—tried to force them to help his family. And they killed him because of it.”

“*They,*” Sean repeated, looking up at Nancy. “Who’s *they*?”

“H&H?”

“That’s not a person, Wheeler. That’s not a name.”

“I don’t know who it was. *Yet*. But whoever killed Joey—I’m pretty sure they killed Georgia too.”

Sean shook his head. “I find it difficult to believe that, if H&H really is behind whatever’s happening to these people, that Georgia didn’t know about it.”

“She did,” Nancy said. The declaration hurt a little. “But for some reason, she was murdered anyway.”

“Hm,” Sean said. “And—these sick people. It’s not everyone who’s had their house fixed up by H&H, is it?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” Nancy said. She’d felt so good about this story thirty seconds ago. Why did it feel like it was slipping out of her hands now?

“Okay.” Sean grabbed the glasses off his nose, absently cleaning the lenses as he thought. “And the cops—they know all of this?”

“They know…a lot of it.”

He squinted at her, her careful phrasing absolutely not lost on him. “Wheeler…”

Nancy matched his squint with one of her own. “What?”

“I just want to make sure you understand the scope of what you’re suggesting,” Sean said. “There’s the murderer on the loose, sure—”

“Sure,” Nancy echoed, with a lopsided smile.

There was another *squeak* as Sean scooted Marty’s chair in closer, trapping Nancy’s attention.

“Don’t interrupt, kid. Just listen. After the earthquake and the fire and the—Jesus Christ, there’s too much to even get into—Hawkins was fucked up. It *is* fucked up. And in this mess of military occupation and natural disaster and *death,* Hearth & Home is one of the only things out there helping this town hold on to its sanity. If you take them on and you don’t land every single punch, it’s not just their lawyers that’ll come after you. It’s your friends. Your neighbors. Everyone that you’re stuck in quarantine with. Is that something you’re prepared for?”

She wanted to say yes, to answer without hesitation. But all her recklessness had drained away. “I’ll keep this quiet for now,” she said. “I’m not even—officially pitching you this story. Not yet.” *So don’t tell Corporal Young.*

“Good,” said Sean, and the flicker in his eyes told her that he’d heard her unspoken plea. “Because I’m still not convinced this *is* the story. You’ve got a lot of questions, maybe even a couple of answers, but where’s your *evidence*? You need proof before you can run with this. *I* need proof.”

It was a challenge. Nancy was good with challenges. She jutted out her chin. “I’ll get it.”

He nodded. “Okay,” he said, and it sounded like he actually believed her. Grabbing his coffee, he pushed to his feet. “Then I’ll let you know what I find out on my end.”

Nancy frowned up at him. “Find out…”

He smiled, a little lopsided. “Come on. Every killer story needs background. You’re gonna need a picture of what H&H is like outside of Hawkins, and between us, I’m the one who’ll have an easier time getting

answers from reporter friends outside of town.” He sipped his coffee, one eyebrow quirked. “I actually *have* reporter friends outside of town.”

Sean turned and trudged back in the direction of his office. Nancy sank back in her chair, unable to beat back the tiny smile from her face.

Proof. Somewhere in this town, Hearth & Home had left glaring evidence. And Nancy was going to drag it out into the light.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

It was one thing to make a resolution like that, and another to know where the hell to actually *start.* Nancy was still mulling that over when she woke up the next morning. She rolled out of bed, feeling like her brain was suffocated with the questions that Sean had put to her the day before.

Why was Georgia killed, if she was part of this conspiracy?

Why are some H&H clients getting sick, and not others?

And maybe the most pressing of all: *How am I going to prove any of this?*

Nancy threw open the curtains of her bedroom window, hoping that the sunlight would burn away some of the cotton that was muffling her thoughts. The light that streamed in fell across something on the window seat: her college registration packet.

For some reason, the sight of it sank heavy in her stomach. She still hadn't filled it out. She hadn't even begun to look through the list of classes on offer. Every time she picked it up, she found herself getting distracted—or maybe it would be more accurate to say that she distracted herself.

No more, Nancy told herself sternly. If she didn't know where to go on the H&H story, at least she knew how to handle *this*. This was the moment. She would buckle down, finish reviewing the packet, fill it out, submit it in time to meet the registration deadline—

There was a rap on her window.

Startled, Nancy looked over to find Jonathan crouched on the roof just outside. She hurried over to let him in. "What are you doing?"

"Good morning," he said. There was a cautious little smile on his face, but he didn't move from the ledge, like he wasn't assuming that she was

going to let him in.

She took a step back to give him space. “You could have come through the front door.”

He shrugged, swinging his legs over onto the window seat. “Maybe. I wasn’t sure your mom wanted to see me.” He froze as a thought occurred to him. “Actually—do *you* want to see me? I mean after—before—”

She tried to casually slide the Emerson packet under the pillow on her bed. “Of course I do. Why wouldn’t my mom want to see you?”

“Because she’s been—” He shook his head, but she knew what he wasn’t saying. For days now—ever since their argument in the kitchen—Mom had treated the subject of Jonathan Byers like it was a plague rat. Just the mention of his name brought a scowl to her face. “Never mind,” Jonathan said. “It’s fine.” He took a deep breath, resettling himself. “Are you free this morning?”

The corner of the packet was still sticking out from beneath Nancy’s pillow. She readjusted so that she couldn’t see it. “Yeah,” she said. “For what?”

Jonathan’s tiny smile inched wider. “It’s a surprise.”

Ten minutes later, Nancy was in the passenger seat of Jonathan’s car, driving along with the windows down and the Ramones tinnily blasting from the car’s broken speakers. She still had no idea where they were headed, and no way of guessing—Jonathan had insisted she cover her eyes.

She swayed against her seatbelt when Jonathan finally pulled the car to a stop and shut off the engine. “Now?” she asked.

“Not yet.”

He helped her out of the car and guided her along some unseen path—a sidewalk? That was her best guess, at any rate. “Jonathan, come on,” she said, laughing as her shuffling feet tripped over an uneven crack in the concrete. “This is so dramatic.”

“You like dramatic,” Jonathan said, steadying her with a hand on each shoulder. He was keeping pace behind her, guiding her forward with gentle nudges, steering her around things that she couldn’t see. “Remember that time we made a blood pact? Before we were even dating?”

“If I fall because of you, then you can add that to the list of shared trauma, okay?”

“Sounds good.” Another nudge at her shoulders sent her a step to the right. “Almost there…”

There was the unmistakable creak of door hinges. Then Nancy’s next step landed on wooden floorboards instead of ragged pavement. She listened to the echo her footstep made off of blank walls and a low ceiling. “Jonathan,” she said.

“Okay,” he said. “You can take your hands down.”

Nancy dropped her hands, blinking in the sunlight. She was standing in the front room of a small house, a large picture window framing the sun at her back. A Formica-laminated peninsula separated the one-person kitchen from the living space, and a single narrow hall jutted into the darkness to her left—the passage to whatever bedrooms this house had.

“I wanted to show you first,” Jonathan said. He still had his hands on her shoulders, and the squeeze he gave them now was of gratitude, not guidance. “Since it’s kind of thanks to you that we’re even here.”

“Here…” Nancy blinked at her surroundings, trying to figure out what Jonathan wasn’t saying. “Wait, Jonathan—is this your house?”

He stepped up next to her, surveying the room with a proud little smile on his face. “Pretty much.”

“But I thought—” If she shook her head hard enough, maybe her thoughts would rattle into some kind of comprehensible shape. “I thought you were striking out. I thought you couldn’t find anything.”

“You mean, you thought we couldn’t *afford* a place,” Jonathan said. There was a little edge to his voice, one that wasn’t quite sanded smooth by his smile. Her first instinct was to push back against that, but she forced herself to keep her mouth shut. There was no sense in arguing with him—not when he was right.

“Well, we couldn’t,” Jonathan went on. “Afford a place. Any place. But then I remembered what you were saying about Hearth & Home, and I thought—maybe they’re worth a shot.”

Something cold ran down Nancy’s spine. “Hearth & Home?”

“Look.” Jonathan pointed out the front window…and there it was, tucked in the shadow of the sweeping sycamore tree. The sign.

Saving Towns. Changing Lives.

Her heart sank all the way into her stomach. “Oh.”

“I should have thought of it sooner,” Jonathan said with a wry smile. He began pacing toward the hallway, flicking on a light switch as he went. The butter-yellow glow illuminated a few open doorways—two bedrooms and one bathroom. “I kind of can’t believe I didn’t. But once I figured it out, I reached out to the H&H offices and they gave me a couple of addresses to check out.”

“Empty, but fixed up?” Nancy said, Georgia’s words echoing back to her through a slurry of dread.

“Exactly. This was the first one I visited. Here.” He waved her over. “I think this is going to be me and Will’s room. It’ll suck having to share, but it’s better than all three of us in the same space, the way it is now.”

Feeling a little like she was moving through syrup, Nancy padded over to look over his shoulder at the unremarkable room beyond. “Oh,” she said again.

He shot her a funny look. “I know it’s small—”

“It’s nice.”

“It’s not,” Jonathan said. “But it’s ours, and that’s enough for now.”

Nancy nodded. There were so many words—questions and warnings and explanations—bubbling up behind her teeth that she didn’t know where to start. And because she’d never been able to get anything past Jonathan, he read this loud and clear across her face.

“What’s up with you?” he asked, a frown pinching his eyebrows together.

“I’m just—” *Worried that this house is somehow going to burn your lungs out of your body?* “I’m just worried you’re moving a little fast here.”

A long moment stretched as Jonathan stared at her, obviously struggling to process what had just come out of her mouth. “You’re kidding.”

“No, I’m not. Jonathan—there’s some stuff about Hearth & Home that you don’t know—”

“Like what?” he demanded.

“Like—like people who’ve had their houses repaired by H&H? They’ve started to get sick. All across Hawkins.”

Another long moment. This time, Jonathan’s stare broke only when he took a deep, bracing breath, letting his eyes slip shut. “Okay,” he said. “So—people in every Hearth & Home house have been getting sick?”

“Not every house.” The walls of this hallway were too narrow. Nancy needed room to breathe. She paced back out into the living room, planting herself in the square of sunlight from the front window. “But a lot of them. Some of them.”

Jonathan followed her, his pace sluggish. “And these houses are…how close to the Rift?”

Nancy chomped the inside of her cheek, already seeing where Jonathan’s train of thought was going. “Close.”

“Okay.” Jonathan took another deep breath. “So if these people are having respiratory problems, do we think it might be connected to—”

“Are you seriously blowing me off right now?” Nancy asked.

“No! All I’m *trying* to do is, I don’t know, *celebrate the fact* that my family isn’t going to be *homeless anymore*. And you’re coming back to me with a conspiracy about the organization that’s helping us make that happen?”

Sean had warned her that she would face this. Jonathan’s words were almost a perfect echo of his. “It’s not a conspiracy,” Nancy said.

“Nancy—”

“The CEO was murdered,” Nancy shot back. “Just a couple of days ago. Did you hear about that?”

“I did, and that was crazy,” Jonathan said, “but if Ronald McDonald died, I wouldn’t stop eating hamburgers.”

“You’re being facetious.”

Jonathan’s voice was tight. “Maybe I am. But—” He hissed out a short breath, holding his temper in check. “Never mind.”

She folded her arms over her chest. “What.”

“I said never mind.”

“And I said ‘What,’ so…*what*?” Nancy said, irritation making her sharp. “Just tell me, Jonathan. I know it hasn’t felt that way lately, but we’re supposed to *talk* to each other.”

She hadn’t meant to let that slip—not really. The wall between them was something that neither of them had acknowledged ever since the Byers clan had rolled back into Hawkins. They chatted to each other over it like friendly neighbors, but they made no attempts to cross it themselves. And Nancy had just hit it with a sledgehammer.

“I might be being facetious,” Jonathan said slowly, “but I’m also living in the real world. And the real world *blows*. It really fucking *blows* right now.”

Nancy shook her head. “We’re going to find Vecna—”

“I’m not talking about Vecna,” Jonathan snapped. “I’m talking about—about *life*, about *real life* and *right now*.”

There was desperation fizzing in Nancy’s stomach. It turned out that the wall between them was made of slick ice. She couldn’t find a handhold in this conversation. “So am I.”

“You’re not, though!” Jonathan paced away from her, scrubbing a hand through his hair. “*Listen* to me, Nancy. This whole—hunch. Do you have any evidence? *Hard* evidence.”

“I have two people who’ve died over this *hunch*,” she bit out.

“And what else?”

The inside of Nancy’s cheek was being gnawed ragged. “Nothing. *Yet*.” He just looked at her. “What do you want me to say, Jonathan? I’m just trying to help. If you guys move in here and it turns out that I’m right—”

“*If*—” He pointed at her. “See? That’s the first time I’ve heard you use that word in *weeks*. Ever since I got back, you’ve been just, like, *certainties*. We’re *going* to find Vecna. Hearth & Home is *definitely* up to something. You’re *absolutely* headed to Emerson in the fall—”

“I *am* headed to Emerson in the fall. Just because you’re backing out—”

He shook his head. “Of course. That’s what this is about.”

“No—”

“Nancy, we don’t know what’s headed for us next. The world has been spinning off its axis for years—maybe forever—and all I can do is focus on *real life* and *right now*.” His pacing had taken him into the kitchen. He set both hands on the linoleum countertops, spreading his fingers apart, trying to center himself. “Right now? In my real life? I need to figure out where my family is going to live. And until you show up with a really concrete reason why this shouldn’t be that place, then *that* is what I’m gonna focus on.”

She was *trying*. But it wasn’t like she could just conjure hard evidence out of thin air. Desperation built inside of her chest. “So you’d rather move your family into a house that’ll kill them than listen to me?”

He gave a harsh laugh. “Now who’s being facetious?” She just stared at him until he threw his hands up into the air, exasperated. “Jesus, Nancy. Not all of us are living at the end of the book, you know? Did you ever think that when you try to get the rest of us to skip ahead too, you might be screwing things up?”

The words hit hard enough to punch the air out of Nancy’s lungs. It took her a second to find the ability to speak once again. “I’m not just going to sit around and wait for the world to end.”

“I know. But not everything is the end of the world. I guess—I guess I’m just saying, when you hear hoofbeats, think horses. When you see flickering lights, think faulty wiring.”

A flush of mortification ripped through Nancy. “I’m trying to help.”

Jonathan sighed. “And I’m trying to take care of my family.” He rubbed at one of his temples. “I’ve done my due diligence, Nancy. I’ve gotten the inspections. I’ve seen the report. The wiring’s good. The roof is good. The foundation is good. The house is *good*. I can’t keep talking about this, okay? I didn’t bring you here to—to fight.”

Something in his words hit an alarm in the back of Nancy’s mind. But she couldn’t concentrate on narrowing down what it was. Things were too raw. And, most humiliating of all, she could feel tears stinging the backs of her eyes.

“Fine,” she finally said. Struggling for composure, she tucked her hair back behind her ears. “Then if you don’t want to fight, you should probably take me home.”

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Chapter Twenty-Three

Jonathan took her home. He drove away instead of watching her walk through the door. This was fine, because Nancy didn't make it up her front walk. Instead, she headed straight for her station wagon and charged back onto the road.

The lights were on at the Squawk when Nancy pulled up outside. She parked next to Steve's BMW and stalked into the building. Robin and Steve were in the radio booth, the ON AIR light blasting above the door. Robin was chattering happily into the microphone while Steve swiveled in the chair next to her, fingers ready at the soundboard. Nancy couldn't hear what they were saying, but she could guess that it had something to do with the Cher record that Robin was twirling between her fingers.

They didn't notice Nancy's entrance. She gave them a half-hearted wave anyway, just in case, before heading down into the basement.

It had become a pretty nice space, once Robin and Nancy had finished stacking the clutter of record boxes against the walls. The basement was well-sized, the ceiling was high, and once the source of the ungodly stink had been uncovered (a nest of mice that had been making a habit of chewing through the record sleeves in one of the more distant and undisturbed corners of the basement; Robin swore she hadn't screamed when she'd found them, but Jonathan had told Nancy that this was a lie), it even smelled halfway decent. A little mildewy, a little dusty, but mostly fine.

The perfect place to stash a conspiracy board.

This was what Nancy retrieved now, sliding the board from behind one of the shelves of records. She leaned it against the wall, chewing the inside

of her cheek as she contemplated it.

Evidence. Proof. Sean needed it. Jonathan needed it. *Nancy needed it*. This morning when she'd woken up, she'd felt unmoored by the need for it. Like she hadn't known where to start looking. Now, though—

Something Jonathan said had sparked an idea in her brain. She just—couldn't figure out what it *was*.

Frustrated, Nancy paced closer to the conspiracy board. The list of Hearth & Home projects was pinned to the corkboard. She bent over, squinting at the addresses she and Robin had pulled together. There was the Taft house. The Washington house. The houses and businesses of every person, sick and well, who'd had their lives revitalized and destroyed by H&H.

For some reason, Nancy's eye snagged on one address in particular. It took her a second to remember which building it belonged to. *Dr. Larson*. The pediatrician whose office complex had hosted Nancy's first interview with Georgia. But what was so special about *that* building? Why was it setting off sparks in the back of Nancy's mind?

"The wiring's good."

Strangely, the more she mulled it over, it was Jonathan's voice that filtered back to her. Nancy's first urge was to flinch away from it. She forced herself to replay the rest of the memory.

"The roof is good."

"The foundation is good."

Foundation. Tyler Gorse had talked about foundations, hadn't he? He'd given an entire monologue on the subject from the wreckage beneath Dr. Larson's building. "*The foundation is really…the foundation*," he'd said, right before launching into a passionate monologue about the differences between—what was it? Crawl spaces and…

Slab. Slab foundation.

Nancy's fingers tightened on the list of addresses. What kind of foundation did the Taft family have? What about everybody else who had gotten sick? She'd been racking her brain to find a link between these affected families—could this be it?

There was one way for her to find out.

Nancy sprinted up the basement stairs, taking them two at a time. Robin and Steve were still in the radio booth, laughing as Steve brandished a rubber chicken in the direction of the microphone. Nancy raised her fist to rap on the window—

And stopped.

Real life and right now.

Nancy had already screwed up one relationship today by trying to drag someone along on a hunch. She didn't need to screw up a second. Robin's job at the Squawk was important—not only to their Vecna-hunting efforts, but also just because Robin liked it. Nancy's baseless little inkling wasn't enough to haul her away from her shift.

She slunk out of the radio station and climbed into her car.

Town Hall and the Hawkins Public Library had both been in the direct path of the Rift. The wreckage that had been made of both buildings was beyond even the capabilities of Hearth & Home to repair. All the records and books that could be salvaged had been relocated to the old Methodist preschool two miles from the Rift's epicenter, a state of affairs that Melissa the librarian was not happy with.

She made her displeasure known with an acid glare as Nancy pushed through the front door. But Nancy's skin had been thick before, and coming off a fight with Jonathan, it was dragon hide. She just smiled sunnily into Melissa's glasses and asked where the building permit records were being stored.

A repurposed craft supply closet, it turned out. Nancy stood beneath the bare bulb that hung from the ceiling, rotating in place as she scanned the cardboard boxes that lined the shelves, searching for street names.

Building permits registered in Hawkins were kept accessible to the public in the files at Town Hall. If someone wanted to research the construction of a house or building, all they had to do was find the file with the address they were looking for, and they would have the building's entire history at their fingertips.

Ostensibly, this was so any potential homebuyers could confirm that the house they were interested in had been built using the appropriate permits. But in Nancy's case…it was a nifty little way to check out the foundation construction of every Hearth & Home property.

It took two hours to cross-reference the list of H&H projects that she and Robin had compiled from Georgia's office with the permit files in the craft closet. When she closed the last folder and sat back on her heels, there were stacks of cardboard boxes piled up around her higher than her head. Her back hurt, her neck hurt, her eyes were aching from strain—

But she was smiling.

Slab foundations. She'd been right. It was the common thread she'd been looking for. Most of the buildings on H&H's to-do list were sitting on crawl spaces, but the homes whose residents had gotten sick had a slab foundation.

There were only two non-residential addresses that shared this detail—commercial businesses built on slab.

The first was the office where Dr. Larson had practiced. The second was the remnants of Hawkins Credit Union, the town bank.

Nancy burst out of the craft closet, plunging past Melissa and through the front doors. She stopped in her tracks as fresh air hit her, blinking in the setting sun. She hadn't realized that it was getting so late in the day. Nancy considered her next move for a moment, chewing the inside of her cheek.

She could wait until tomorrow morning to visit the credit union and the pediatrician's office building. But something in her rebelled at that idea. She was onto something here. She didn't want to wait around to check it out.

Fine. Then she'd compromise. She'd visit one of the buildings tonight and save the second for tomorrow. And since she'd already seen Dr. Larson's building once, she decided to go for the unknown quantity. Climbing into her car, Nancy took off for the bank.

It was easy enough to get inside once she'd made her way up the wide, shallow steps out front. Any bank security that had been in place was gone now, dismantled once the gigantic Rift had opened up two blocks down the

street. Nancy stepped into the lobby and did a cursory sweep of the space, the amber-orange sunlight that filtered through the open doors and the broken windows guiding her way.

But whatever Nancy was looking for would not be up here. It wasn't hard to find the door to the basement. It was behind the teller's rickety counter, and it swung open at Nancy's touch. Behind it, narrow steps descended into darkness. Digging out her flashlight, Nancy trained it on the gloom and marched downward.

The stairs spat her out in what had once been a large, open office. Any desks or chairs or cubicles that had once cluttered the space had been cleared away post-quake, but there were still scraps of old green carpeting stuck to the cement floor. Nancy's flashlight took in the debris as she padded into the room.

Wall. Wall. Ceiling. Floor. Wall. Wall. Ceiling. Floor. Nancy tagged on each with her beam as she paced forward. It became almost a ritual, like she was carving a path for herself through the darkness with her flashlight, and she told herself that this was just because she didn't want to miss anything. She'd come all this way, after all, and what was the point of that if she was going to do a shitty job of investigating now that she was here?

But beneath all this rational logic was a little voice in the back of her head. It shrilled, too alarming to be ignored, that if she didn't keep up her little routine—didn't keep using the light of her flashlight to knock on those walls, that ceiling, that floor—then one of those things would just stop existing, swallowed up by the pitch black.

She fought back a shudder. *Stupid*, she told herself. That was just superstition talking—ancient superstition, ancestral scared-of-the-dark superstition that she'd inherited from one of her caveman ancestors. The worst thing that could happen to her down here was maybe getting jump-scared by a rat. So there was no sense in getting all worked up about—

Something loomed out of the darkness.

Nancy yelped, instinctively raising her flashlight, ready to strike down with it if she had to. This had the unfortunately predictable result of

plunging the way forward into black as the light swung wildly upward—but hey, at least she could safely say that the ceiling still existed.

Calm down, she told herself, as sternly as a person using an Eveready as a weapon could. She forced herself to take a deep breath, bracing and steadying herself. The next inhale came easier after that, once an attack failed to materialize. On an exhale, she brought her flashlight back around to face her attacker.

The laugh that punched out of her had a manic edge to it. *The bank vault door*. That was what had given her a heart attack. Something about the odd shape—as circular as the vaults she'd seen in her dad's favorite old Westerns—had completely misfired every neuron in her brain, spinning her out in the process. *Embarrassing.* Nancy squared her shoulders and strode purposefully toward the door, trying to leave the flush of mortification in the room behind her.

When Vecna's earthquake had ripped through Hawkins, the shock waves had somehow warped the vault door's massive hinges. Now it hung at a crooked angle, a gap of about a foot between the frame and the door itself. When Nancy tried to pull it open wider, the hinges gave such a deafening scream of protest that she almost retreated behind her flashlight again.

If she didn't want to alert the entire neighborhood, it seemed like she'd have to…squeeze. Fine. She'd shoved her way through the trunk of a tree into a parallel dimension. She could get into a bank vault. Flattening her back against the doorframe, Nancy wedged first one shoulder into the gap, then one hip. And then, as some jagged piece of metal scraped her back and ripped a hole in one of her favorite shirts, she wiggled herself through.

Her first reaction, once she was inside the vault, was disappointment at the sight of the bare shelves. It wasn't as though she'd been planning a heist or anything, but some naïve part of her—probably the part that still thought she was watching an episode of *Gunsmoke*—had expected there to be at least a *few* cartoonish sacks of cash piled up against the walls.

But if the Farrier family hadn't left any of their patrons on ice in their mortuary, then HCU *definitely* hadn't left their clients' money up for grabs.

The vault was clear. Nancy swept her flashlight around, intoning her little ritual as she scanned the little room. *Wall. Wall. Ceiling. Fl—*

Well. It was a good thing she hadn't started walking forward.

There were no scraps of green carpeting here—no sense in interior-decorating a room that no one was meant to spend a lot of time in. But the thing that had stopped Nancy dead in her tracks wasn't the lack of carpet.

It was the lack of *floor*.

Not so paranoid now, whispered that little voice in the back of Nancy's head. *Look what happens when you don't keep checking.*

But there wasn't anything strange or supernatural at play here. Upon closer inspection, Nancy could see the crooked lines in the cement where it had been sheared through by a jackhammer. *Slab,* Nancy thought, the echoes of Tyler Gorse's lecture drifting through her memory. In the middle of all this reconstruction, someone had come through this basement and torn out part of the concrete foundation.

Nancy shone her flashlight into the pit that had once been the vault room floor.

There—at the far end of the trench—her disintegrating flashlight beam picked out the outlines of four cylindrical shapes. But at this distance and with the underwhelming power of her flashlight, she couldn't make out more detail than that. If she wanted more answers—

Then she was going to have to jump into the pit.

"Have to"? Her internal editor—the one that caught typos for fun—flagged that phrase, circling and underlining it with a red pen. *You don't "have to" do anything*.

Nancy chewed her lip, deliberating. That was right, after all. If she turned away now—if she left the vault, left the bank—she wouldn't even necessarily be backing off this mystery for good. She could go find someone, find *Robin*, bring her down here too. Nancy could make sure that she wasn't headed straight into something stupid *alone*. But—

But what if this was nothing? What if it was another Farrier Funeral Home? What if Jonathan was right and she was skipping to the end of the book?

Well. If she was, then there was no point in dragging anyone along with her. Not if it was going to screw up their lives, like Jonathan had said. And anyway, the vault door had already ruined her shirt. What was the harm in getting dirty now?

Decision made. Nancy didn't give herself a moment to second-guess it. She sat on the edge of the pit, clenched her flashlight between her teeth, and —gripping the lip of the concrete—lowered herself down.

It was a farther drop than it had looked under the anemic glow of the flashlight—deep enough for Nancy to hang with her arms fully extended and her feet still swinging in the air. She gave herself a count of five to steady her nerves. Then, she swung her heels back, giving herself some space from the wall before she released her grip—

Her boots hit the dirt, her momentum sending her sprawling backward. She just barely managed to roll to the side so that her shoulder absorbed more of her weight than the back of her head. The flashlight clattered out of her mouth, rolling off somewhere to her left, its light shining at some erratic angle. She coughed, the wind knocked out of her.

Maybe I'll just lay here for a while, she thought to herself, staring blindly up into the darkness, hoping the ceiling was still there. But the idea passed as quickly as it had come. She had launched herself into this pit to figure out what those damn shapes were. She wasn't going to leave until she had an answer. Groaning as her shoulder protested, Nancy snatched her flashlight back up and shoved to her knees, scrabbling around to take a look.

Barrels. She should have known—what else could be that size and shape? Four blue metal barrels had been shoved against the far side of the pit, jammed up against one another. Nancy stood, trudging closer, the dirt crunching beneath the soles of her boots.

The barrels weren't any more remarkable up close. Nancy squinted through the darkness, scrutinizing every visible inch. All she could see were about a million rust spots, smears of mud near the bottoms, and—scratches?

No—those weren't scratches. Nancy leaned in to inspect them. They were *imprints,* small machine-stamped lines that seemed to form some kind

of pattern. Something about it was vaguely familiar…but between the corrosion and a few deep dents, she couldn't get a good look at the shape. Not helpful.

It was as ridiculous to be disappointed by that as it was to be disappointed by the emptiness of the vault. What had she expected? A helpful *Property of* sticker? *I mean. It would have been nice.*

She coughed again.

Well, if these barrels weren't going to be kind enough to introduce themselves, then she would go digging. Nancy could see the lip where the barrel's lid jutted, just far enough for her to wedge her fingers into. She shuffled around to brace herself against the wall, maneuvering for leverage as she gripped the edge of the lid.

But just as she was about to give the lid its first shove, another cough shuddered through her. Then another. And before Nancy knew it, she was in the middle of a full-blown coughing fit, doubled over, bracing herself against her knees.

By the time the fit subsided, her throat was raw. *What the hell?* Nancy wiped at her streaming eyes, straightening up with effort—

Which was when she noticed the mud on her shoes.

It wasn't a strange sight. Or at least, it wouldn't have been if Nancy hadn't known that her boots had been mud-free when she'd entered the bank. And the dirt beneath the foundation had been dry as a bone when she'd gone sprawling in it, just a few moments ago. So what—

Smears of mud on the barrels.

She shifted. The ground sucked at the soles of her feet. Swallowing back another hacking cough, Nancy pointed her flashlight downward. And now that she was looking for it, it was impossible to miss the way the light bounced off the liquid pooling around the bases of the barrels, soaking into the dirt…

Evaporating into the air.

Her eyes stung. Her throat was raw. Nancy was abruptly treated to a flash of memory: Mrs. Taft in her hospital bed, oxygen tubing clipped to her

nose, a rattle in her chest. Were there barrels like these buried under the Taft house? Leaking into the soil?

And if that was the case…was Nancy giving herself a triple-sized dose right now as she crawled all over them?

The thought passed through Nancy in a wave, leaving her bleary and woozy in its wake—and on second thought, that probably had more to do with the toxic chemicals than it did with anything else. She caught herself against the wall of the pit, just before her dizziness could topple her down into the mud, and squeezed her eyes shut for a second, waiting for it to pass.

It didn't.

Shit. Nancy wrenched her eyes back open. There was no more time to waste just sitting around. She was going to have to get out of here before the fogginess in her brain got any worse. Trying to ignore the way her arms windmilled for balance as she shoved away from the wall, she gritted her teeth and stumbled back the way she'd come, across the uneven trench floor. Her strafing flashlight beam tagged on a couple of likely handholds in the wall—if she could wedge her fingers into them, she should be able to haul herself back up into the bank vault. It wasn't like it was that high—

An ungodly screech split the air. Nancy folded over herself, pressing her hands over her ears. The sound was so deafening and so disorienting that it took her what felt like an eon to place it. And when she did—

Her heart plummeted.

That screech—metallic, rusted, warped—had been familiar. She'd elicited it just a few minutes ago. It was the sound of the broken hinges on the vault door being put through their paces. *Someone had closed the vault.* And if she was right about the bone-vibrating *chunk-chunk* that followed, they'd locked the door.

From where Nancy was standing, at the bottom of a pit, with two hundred gallons of chemical waste soaking into her shoes and into her lungs, it looked like—

She was trapped.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

Don’t panic.

Nancy panicked.

Don’t panic.

But it didn’t seem to matter how many times she sternly scolded herself. Nancy’s endocrine system had other ideas, and none of them included listening to the logical part of her brain. She observed, from some foggy corner of her mind, that her heart was racing. That same distant part of her vaguely made a note that her lungs were heaving in claustrophobic breaths, and that this probably wasn’t good, since the air was full of poison. This clinical diagnosis only made her gasping get worse, made her heart beat harder, made her head foggier.

Don’t panic.

She was going to die down here.

Don’t panic.

No one was ever going to find her.

Don’t—

No.

If anyone had asked Nancy, even five minutes before, whether the person that would snap her out of a hysterical spiral would be Principal Higgins, she would have sworn that they’d gone off the deep end. But for some reason—in this shitty and awful and cataclysmic moment—it was Higgins’s face that swam into focus in her memory.

“Let us take a moment to remember those classmates that could not be here with us today.”

Nancy’s heart rate slowed—just a fraction, but enough to be noticeable.

“Barbara Holland. Heather Holloway.”

She took a beat between breaths. The pressure in her head seemed to be lifting.

“Samuel Rivers. Nathan Chu.”

Nancy forced herself to uncurl her fingers. She hadn’t even realized that she was clenching her hands.

“Patrick McKinney. Jason Carver.”

Eddie Munson, Nancy thought. She let out a long exhale. Shook out her shoulders. Wiped the beading sweat from her forehead. Wrenched her anxiety back under control.

She was not going to be another sad little abridged obituary in *The Hawkins Post. Especially not while Virgil Donovan is running that section,* she sniped to herself. And if she was well enough to make snarky comments about the paper’s editorial staff, then she was well enough to get herself the *hell* out of here. Wiping her hands off on her jeans, Nancy set her mind to the task in front of her.

The first step was to get a closer look at the vault door, just to get a sense of how much shit she was truly in. Doing her best to ignore the growing burning in the back of her throat, Nancy found the edge of the pit where she had made her descent. One little hop, and she grabbed the lip of the hole. Then, with shoulders that burned, she hauled herself up and over, until she was sprawled belly-down on what remained of the vault floor.

Okay. This was forward momentum. This was good. Nancy dragged herself to her knees, yanking her flashlight out of her back pocket, and trained the beam on the door.

It was somehow less impressive from the inside. That made sense, in a utilitarian sort of way. A vault’s job was to keep people from breaking *in,* not to keep them from breaking *out,* and if that hopeful little detail held true, then maybe escaping from this place wasn’t outside the realm of possibility.

Unfortunately, Nancy’s safecracking expertise pretty much began and ended with *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid,* and she seemed to have left her dynamite at home.

Don’t panic, she told the rising anxiety in her chest, and this time it listened, shrinking enough so it wouldn’t choke the life out of her while she continued her inspection.

There was a handle on the interior of the door—something basic, to be used to pull the door closed after stepping inside. A yank at it just confirmed what Nancy already had known: The door was locked, the bolt secure. But —

Creak.

It was a baby version of the screech from before, but it was still loud enough to scrape her eardrums. Nancy pulled the handle again, and this time the sound made Nancy flinch—

And it reminded her about the hinges. The *broken* hinges.

Nancy jerked her flashlight across the door, no longer focusing on the handle or on the lock. And sure enough—there were the warped, twisted hinges, still mangled from the chaos of the earthquake. Nancy pressed nearer to get a better look at the bottom one, feeling the edges, tracing the places where it was bolted to the door and to the wall. There was a gap there—a finger’s width or so between the steel of the hinge plate and the cinder block behind it. And Nancy would never claim to be an expert on vault construction, but she was *pretty damn sure* that hinges weren’t supposed to bend like that.

Actually—she raised her flashlight to illuminate the top hinge—she was pretty sure that half her work had already been done for her. The top hinge had been completely torn away from the wall. The heavy vault door was hanging solely from its bottom hinge, explaining the ungodly sound every time it was shifted.

Maybe—*maybe*—if Nancy was able to break that second hinge off the wall—

She didn’t let herself finish that thought. It felt too similar to hope, and the only thing she had space for at the moment was action.

Leverage. That’s what she needed. Something to shove into the space between the hinge and the wall, something that could pry it open. She briefly considered her trusty flashlight, but there was no way she’d be able

to fit the handle of her Eveready into that gap—and besides, the flashlight would snap the second she tried to apply any real pressure.

She needed something sturdier. Something metal. Nancy turned around to survey the vault again—

She sagged against the door when the world kept spinning. It felt, very suddenly, like someone was pumping acid down her windpipe. Maybe they were. Maybe that was what was in those barrels. Nancy braced her hands against her knees, dipping her head, willing her vision to steady and her stomach to stop churning.

When she had composed herself enough to raise her head again, she realized that the flashlight—still gripped in her hand—was pointing in some random direction into the trench. And somewhere in those depths, something was glinting.

Pipes.

That was what had been exposed by H&H's excavations. *The plumbing*. Another memory flashed through Nancy's mind: not Higgins's dour face but rather the stacks of piping against the walls in the basement beneath Dr. Larson's offices. If she could get her hands on one of those pipes, she could use it to pry the last hinge free.

It was easy enough to find one. Halfway down the trench, her beam fell on a pipe jutting from the remains of the concrete foundation. It stuck out far enough to give Nancy a workable length to use as leverage—assuming she was able to break it free.

She had to sidle along the row of safety deposit boxes on her way over to the pipe. The rim of flooring around the trench was narrower here, and that, along with the blurry swimming of her head, was making her sway on her feet. She dug her fingers into the wall at her back as she went. If she fell into the pit now, she wasn't sure she'd have the strength to haul herself back out again.

As soon as she was close enough, she sank down on the edge of the trench and dangled her legs over to hang on either side of the pipe. The darkness telescoped and strobed in front of her eyes, and she took a second

to lean her head back against the wall, willing her vertigo to cut her some *fucking slack*.

No dice. And she couldn't wait around for her mind to clear. *Get to work, Wheeler*.

The belt around her waist had belonged to her grandfather. Nancy had personally always liked the boxy, oversize look of it, and the fact that Jack Childress had been a no-nonsense farmer who'd invested in things that lasted meant that the leather was sturdy and strong. Nancy unfastened it, sliding it out of the loops of her jeans and holding it by the buckle. The end of the belt snaked into the pit, the black leather almost disappearing into the dark.

The pipe was only a foot or so below where Nancy was perched, close enough that Nancy could loop the belt around it. She placed her foot on the pipe right where it jutted from the foundation and wrapped the ends of the belt around each of her hands as many times as she could. Then—

She *pulled*.

It was hard. It was *so* hard. Nancy wanted to blame how hard it was on the fact that she was being poisoned, but there was also the fact that journalism didn't put a premium on upper body strength. She wasn't sure how long she sat there, listening to the pipe creak and shift in its concrete casing, yanking at the belt with all her strength—

Something gave a *snap*. For a second, Nancy was convinced she'd finally put Grandpa Childress's belt to rest. But then the loose end of the pipe was flying up, cartwheeling through the air. Pure reflex sent Nancy's hand—still wrapped in the belt—snatching outward, grabbing the pipe before it could plummet back down into the trench.

Before she could get lost in disbelief that this had actually *worked*, a trickle of water soaked through one of her pant legs. Nancy bit back a surprised curse, pulling her leg up and out of the stream. A glance told her that the pipe in her hand had been capped. Without it, water was now seeping from the broken pipe in a steady dribble, collecting on the trench floor in a growing puddle.

A problem for later. For now—she had her pipe. All that was left was to get herself out. She started to stand—

But her knees buckled. She pitched sideways, toward the trench, the shadows looming up to smother her. Nancy's arms windmilled, scrabbling for anything to hold on to—*anything*.

One of the safe deposit boxes had been left ajar. Nancy's frantic hands found the edge of it, grabbing on just before her legs could completely betray her. She hauled herself back upright, hugging onto the wall with both arms, panting as the world swayed. It should have been a moment of total relief—but then the coughing was back, racking her entire body, threatening to dislodge her again.

There was no waiting for it to pass. Nancy could feel the pressure building in her lungs with each breath. She would have to push through, regardless of how badly she wanted to take a break. Nancy grappled her way along the safe deposit boxes even as her shoulders shook with hacking coughs, practically crawling back toward the vault door.

Her sight was blurred by the time she got there. Black clouds ate into the edges of her vision. She tried to pull herself up to stand, but her legs refused to comply. *That's fine,* she told herself, shock still making her eerily calm. *It's just the bottom hinge. We can do this sitting down.*

With fingers that felt like jelly, she fumbled her precious pipe around and jammed it into the gap between the hinge plate and the wall. It grated against the cinder block, but it held. *Perfect*. Then, with arms that were already feeling the strain from before, she braced her feet against the wall and…*pulled*.

For one long, horrible moment, nothing happened. Nancy strained her ears as hard as her biceps, listening for the sound of metal bending, for any indication that her desperate plan was working. Sweat rolled down her back. There was some taste welling at the back of her throat, and Nancy steadfastly refused to acknowledge that it was coppery and bitter and probably blood.

But it wasn't sound that grabbed her attention first. It was the door itself—the heavy steel slab that loomed over Nancy's right shoulder. As she gave

the pipe another mighty heave, she could feel the door *shift* in its frame—no more than a millimeter, but enough for her to notice.

It was working. She was making headway. Nancy redoubled her efforts, wrapping hands that were now slick with sweat back around the pipe. She braced her feet against the wall for extra leverage, yanking down with as much force as she could muster, putting her body weight into it—

Choking coughs sent her doubling over. Her grip slipped. She narrowly avoided banging her head against the pipe as she wheezed over herself.

She was so close to escape. *So close*. She just couldn't cross the finish line. She wasn't going to make it. She wasn't strong enough. She was too sick. She was going to die down here.

No, she wasn't.

The pipe was still warm from Nancy's previous exertions. She clenched it in both fists. Then, laying her entire torso across it, she punched her upper body down onto the length of metal.

With a rending shriek, the bolts came away from the wall. The vault door idled inward—not a ton, since the bolt was still holding the opposite side in place, but enough for Nancy to catch a breath of blessedly nontoxic (if a little musty) bank-basement air. She pressed her nose into the hard-won two-inch gap and inhaled deeply.

Her head started to clear. She could feel the gears in her brain start to pick up steam. *I can do this*, she thought, actually believing it. With newfound enthusiasm, she dislodged her best friend, the pipe, from the remains of the door hinge and jammed it into the gap between the door and the frame. One—two—three shoves (and some cracking in the wall on the bolt side of the vault) and the gap was big enough for Nancy to maybe shimmy through.

She wasn't going to spend another second trying to widen it. With grim determination, Nancy rammed herself into the opening. Her shirt, already ripped, took another step into its next life as cleaning rags. Some jagged metal edge tore a chunk out of the side of her jeans. But then—

She was through.

Nancy collapsed on the floor. Heaving breaths filled her lungs—not poisonous, not deadly, *not about to kill her*. She rolled to her back, staring up at the ceiling—

And burst into hysterical laughter.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

The cashier at the Food Mart barely glanced up as Nancy slammed inside hard enough to set the bell above the door tinkling like a reindeer stampede. It wasn't until Nancy had tumbled to a stop in front of the counter that he tore his attention away from his well-creased copy of *The Weekly Watcher.*

Any hope that she was far from the oddest sight he'd seen as a convenience store clerk was quickly banished by the way his eyes widened at the sight of her. Her shirt was torn, her jeans were mud-stained, and her hands were bloody. The adrenaline of her near-death experience had drained out of her, leaving nothing but exhaustion in its wake. This fatigue dragged at her limbs, making her sag where she stood; it had turned what should have been a brisk ten-minute walk from the bank to the Food Mart into a twenty-minute slog. "I need your phone," she said. Coughing had reduced her voice to a husky rasp, barely louder than a whisper. And whether it was the shock of her horrifying state or just the goodness of the cashier's heart, he didn't protest before sliding it across the counter toward her.

Half an hour and two chugged bottles of water later, Nancy was making her trudging way back to Hawkins Credit Union. She had just settled down on the bank's wide front steps when the red-and-blue flashers of a police cruiser appeared at the end of the street. She watched, finishing her third bottle of water, as the squad car pulled to a stop out front and Chief Powell clambered out.

"Miss Wheeler," he greeted her.

"Thanks for coming," she said. The water had done its best to rehabilitate her voice, but she was still struggling to be heard.

He surveyed her from beneath the brim of his hat. There was barely a flicker in his expression as he took in her condition. “Pardon my saying, but you look like hell.”

“It’s been a long night,” Nancy said, hauling herself to her feet. “Did you bring the respirators?”

He rummaged through the squad car’s open window and came back with two Blitz-looking gas masks. “I brought ’em.”

“Great.” But when Nancy reached for one of the respirators, Powell pulled them back. “What are you—”

“It’s not for you, Miss Wheeler.”

She couldn’t lose it on a cop. She wouldn’t. Nancy took a steadying breath, hoping that her next words were at least somewhere in the ballpark of a calm that she didn’t feel. “Are we expecting company?”

He snorted. “You called the police station in the middle of the night talking about illegal toxic chemical waste dumps. This ain’t a tea party. So no, we’re not expecting company. We’re waiting on backup.”

Right on cue, another set of headlights turned onto the road. As it neared, Nancy could see that it wasn’t another police cruiser or even a civilian car. It was a military Humvee, and Nancy had to bite back a groan of exasperation as she watched it park behind Chief Powell.

“Miss Wheeler!” called Captain Rose as he clambered down from the vehicle. “We meet again!”

Nancy’s answering wave was half-hearted at best. “Did you have to call *him*?” she whispered to Chief Powell as Rose marched toward them.

The chief shot her a sharp look. “If the police want to maintain any kind of presence here in Hawkins, we have to play by their rules. This is the new chain of command. I’m just following it.”

If Nancy wanted to push back against that, she’d have to do it later. Rose was climbing the stairs now, fixing Powell and Nancy with his cheerful smile. “Whoa, there!” he exclaimed to the chief as he took in Nancy’s appearance. “You didn’t say this was an *emergency.*”

Powell barely inclined his chin in acknowledgment. “Miss Wheeler is all in one piece.”

Rose let out a low whistle. “Not for lack of trying, looks like. Is that blood?”

Nancy hid her hands behind her back. “I appreciate your concern, Captain Rose, but I promise, I’m totally fine. The important thing is inside __”

Captain Rose was pushing open the bank doors before Nancy could even reach for the door handle. “Ah-ah-ah—I think it’s for the best if you wait out here, young lady.”

She probably wasn’t supposed to notice the condescending edge to Captain Rose’s voice, but it was impossible to ignore. Chief Powell certainly hadn’t missed it; he was carefully inspecting the lintel above the doorway, studiously avoiding eye contact when Nancy cast a beseeching look in his direction.

“Listen,” Rose said, a little softer. “It sounds like you’ve been through the wringer tonight, so I get that you want to see this thing through. But you have to trust me—and Chief Powell, okay? We only want what’s best for Hawkins, and part of what’s best for Hawkins is making sure that you stay safe.”

“Let us do our jobs, kid,” Powell said.

If he’d said it like an order, Nancy might have kept pushing. But he sounded almost sympathetic, like he understood where Nancy’s pushiness was coming from. It unwound a little of the tension spooling in her stomach.

She stepped away from the bank doors, watching in grim silence as Captain Rose accepted the respirator Chief Powell handed him. Then the two men were stomping into the bank, flicking on their flashlights before they could be swallowed whole by the dark.

Despite the fact that every limb weighed heavy with exhaustion, Nancy didn’t bother to return to her seat on the front steps. There was too much energy humming through her—not the revitalizing, full-night’s-sleep kind of energy but the wire-thin, past-midnight kind of energy that made it impossible to rest.

She had her proof. Sean's proof. *Jonathan's proof.* Four big, toxic barrels of it, right beneath her feet. But even with that treasure trove of evidence within her grasp, she couldn't stop her mind from spinning onward, spinning outward. This discovery seemed to have opened the door to more questions than answers.

Why? That was the word blinking in big lights behind her eyes. *Why* would a nonprofit be dumping *chemicals,* of all things? Where would they even *get* chemicals? And what the hell had been that symbol hammered into the outside of the barrels? Nancy scrambled for her notepad and sketched whatever she could remember before exhaustion and adrenaline stole the image from her forever.

Her thoughts were picking up speed now, racing ahead of her. She would have to talk to Powell and Rose when they got back, to see how they felt about an interview. Maybe they'd be able to recognize the symbol. Maybe they'd be willing to go on the record about the implications of this discovery. Maybe this would be enough to turn this story into a front-page headline. She could see it now. NONPROFIT TURNS HAWKINS INTO TOXIC DUMPING GROUND.

She was getting ahead of herself. She was *tired*. Still, there was a glow inside of her that she couldn't ignore—that she didn't *want* to ignore. It was filling her up. She hadn't felt this warm since—

Since before the earthquake.

None of this gets you any closer to finding Vecna.

The glow inside of her flickered.

No, she thought, savagely beating back that nasty little thought. *He can't hide forever. If I can break this story, then I can find him.*

Wait—when had that changed? Nancy scowled into the middle distance. *I* will *find him,* she corrected herself. *I* will—

"Miss Wheeler."

Chief Powell and Captain Rose had returned. They were watching her from the open door, and Nancy realized that she'd been pacing up and down the steps as her mind had whirred and whirred. She shielded her eyes against the glare of their flashlights, climbing back up toward them.

“Did you see them?” she asked, then she frowned as her brain caught back up to the current moment. *Hadn’t Powell and Rose only left a moment ago?* It should have taken them at least a *little* more time to get into the trench and check out the barrels up close.

And neither man looked nearly as grim or concerned as she’d have expected a person who’d just come face-to-face with over two hundred gallons of industrial chemical waste to look. Instead, they were watching her approach with something like…exasperation? Or maybe even… sympathy?

“Listen—” Chief Powell began, but Captain Rose stepped out ahead of him, cutting him off.

“You’re sure *this* is the building you were in earlier?” he asked.

Nancy did *not* like that as an opening question. “I’m sure,” she said. “I don’t think any of these other buildings have vaults in the basement.”

Powell and Rose shared an indecipherable look. “Oh-kay…” Rose ventured. “Then—look, I don’t quite know how to tell you this, but—”

“The basement’s empty,” Powell said.

Nancy couldn’t force his words to make sense in her ears. “It’s what?”

“It’s empty, sweetheart,” Captain Rose said. “I don’t know what you thought you saw down there—*Hey*—”

Nancy had shoved her way between them and was already trotting across the bank lobby. Somewhere behind her, Captain Rose stopped Powell from tackling her. “She’s okay,” she heard him saying distantly, but Nancy was too far underwater to care what the chief said in response.

She took the stairs down into the basement three at a time, caroming across the bare floor at a reckless speed. The vault door loomed out of the darkness at her again, but she was ready for it this time. She plunged through it, flashlight already primed, aimed down into the depths of the trench—

Empty.

Powell and Rose had been telling the truth. At the end of the pit where the poisonous barrels had been piled, now all Nancy could see was the growing pool of shallow water streaming out of the pipe she had broken.

There was no sign of them. Even the chemical fog in the air had dissipated. Nancy took deep breaths, searching for any lingering acrid tinge and finding *nothing*.

"This isn't possible," she muttered, staring blankly into the depths of the vault. She vaguely registered that Chief Powell and Captain Rose had finally caught up with her. "I know what I saw," she said, partly for the benefit of the two men and partly for herself.

"I'm sure you know what you *thought* you saw," Captain Rose said. "But you have to admit, it's dark down here. And with the place as destroyed as it is, you could have mistaken any amount of rubble for—"

"*No!*" Nancy said, whirling around to face them. "You don't understand. It's not just those barrels. Somebody *closed the door* on me when I was in here. They tried to kill me, to gas me to death with whatever's been leaking into the soil." Feeling wild, she whipped back around to stare into the pit. "They must have been watching the building. Waiting for me to drop dead. But when they saw that I got out—that I was going for help—they came in here to move the barrels before I could get back." A flash of resolution hit her. "I was only gone for an hour. They must have been moving fast. There's got to be some evidence left down there." She shoved her flashlight into her back pocket and crouched, starting to maneuver herself over the edge of the trench—

"Whoa whoa whoa." Captain Rose grabbed her shoulder, hauling her back before she could make the plunge. "Let's hold our horses, okay?"

Chief Powell came in on her other side to help her back to her feet. "You've had quite the evening, Miss Wheeler. I think it's best if we go back outside, get some fresh air—"

"*You don't understand*," Nancy said, yanking her arms free. "This isn't just about some barrels, okay? It's about Hearth & Home. *They're* the ones who are putting that stuff here."

"Hang on, hang on," Captain Rose said. "Let's take this piece by piece, okay?" He gingerly took Nancy's gesticulating hands in his, guiding her back, away from the pit. She considered shaking him off again, but it was starting to feel like reality was warping at the edges. Between that and the

fact that every ache in her body was abruptly making itself loudly known, Nancy really did feel a little unsteady. She let herself be ushered back out of the vault and up the basement stairs.

"H&H is doing this all over Hawkins," Nancy said as she shuffled along. She could feel herself losing steam, and the more she did, the clearer she could hear the insane desperation in her voice. She sounded out of her mind. It was no wonder that there was pity written all over Powell's face, or that Rose was talking to her like she was skittish wild animal. "They take on these reconstruction projects, and then they use them to dispose of—chemical waste, like the stuff that was in that vault."

"Okay," Captain Rose said agreeably.

"And then those chemicals leach into the soil and evaporate into the air and—and *poison* the people whose houses they're supposed to be saving."

Rose's sure grip guided her across the bank lobby. She could see the wide double doors standing open, waiting for her. "Just over here—"

He wasn't *listening*. Nobody was *listening to her.* "That's why Joey Taft was killed," she insisted. "He figured out what they were up to. Georgia Miller too. I don't know why, but she must have gotten the wrong person angry—"

Captain Rose drew up short, just shy of the exit. "Joey Taft and Georgia Miller? That's what this is about?"

It was such an abrupt change of tone that Nancy didn't know what to make of it. "And H&H, but—yeah."

Rose shot a look over Nancy's shoulder to Chief Powell. "Do you want to tell her?"

"Just give us a second," Powell said. Rose shrugged, stepping outside.

Nancy had just about had it with dramatic revelations for one evening. Her patience for this one was getting threadbare, and so was her resolution not to get into fights with cops. She fixed Powell with her flattest stare. "Tell me what?"

Powell didn't answer. He was still watching the door. Nancy realized that he was waiting until Rose was out of sight. "Chief?" she prompted.

“He wanted to take you into custody tonight,” he said. “Breaking and entering. Trespassing in a condemned property. Obstruction of justice. He had it all lined up.”

Cold panic washed through Nancy, adrenaline flooding her already maxed nervous system. *Custody?* It felt impossible to square that with Rose’s ever-pleasant demeanor. If that thought had been on his mind, he’d given no sign of it.

Nancy took a careful moment before she answered. “So…am I under arrest?”

“Not just yet.” Rose finally disappeared from view, and Chief Powell let out all of the breath in his lungs on one long exhale. Nancy could feel his relief from where she stood—or maybe that was just her own. This late into the night, it was so hard to tell. “I told him that you were just a stupid kid, playing detective dress-up.”

Hard to take offense at that when it was keeping her out of jail. “Maybe I am.”

He gave an unconscious little shake of the head. “You know,” he said, apropos of nothing, “Chief Hopper warned me about you.”

Nancy struggled to keep her face blank. “He did?”

“Couple years ago. After that lab shut down. He said—that Wheeler girl’s too nosy for her own good.”

“That sounds like him.”

“Yeah, well.” Chief Powell shrugged. “Surprised me. I thought, *Nancy Wheeler? She’s Little Miss Hawkins. Smart girl. Good girl*.”

There are three guns stashed in my bedroom right now, Nancy thought.

“But maybe,” the chief went on, “I’m starting to think Hop was onto something. This town isn’t a playground, Miss Wheeler. It hasn’t been for a while now. If you go sticking your nose in places it doesn’t belong, you can’t be surprised when something bites it off.”

“I was just trying to help,” Nancy said, trying not to wince at how young that sounded.

“You can help by keeping yourself safe,” Chief Powell said. “You’ve got too much good coming your way to be stupid about it now—not when

there's been so much bullshit happening to people, to kids your age, in this town. We need success stories, Miss Wheeler. Happy endings. Not another body."

"Chief," Nancy said. "What did you need to tell me?"

Powell turned his eyes back to the empty front door—whether he was looking for answers or help or Captain Rose, Nancy couldn't be sure. "Tyler Gorse has been arrested for the murders of Georgia Miller and Joey Taft."

Nancy blinked. "Tyler *Gorse*? Georgia's construction manager?"

"That's the one. Seems like Hearth & Home has been operating as a money laundering front for…God, I don't know how long. They overbill for construction materials, labor, whatever else, and scoop whatever's surplus off the top for themselves."

Nancy realized that her head was shaking on its own, rejecting Powell's words. "No. No way."

"You think what you want to think, Miss Wheeler, but as far as stories go? It's more believable than magical disappearing barrels." That stung. Nancy tried not to let it show. "It sounds like Joey Taft found out about this scheme, and when he did, he made the mistake of trying to blackmail Hearth & Home. He was murdered to make him go away. And when Ms. Miller and Mr. Gorse got into an argument over how to proceed from there, things got heated, and…"

He trailed off, finding the end of the sentence distasteful, so Nancy finished it for him. "And Georgia bled out on the office floor."

"That's right." Chief Powell tilted the brim of his hat back. "H&H's closing up shop. Captain Rose tells me that the military'll be debriefing the workers and figuring out a timeline for when they'll be allowed out of here. They're done."

Nancy's head was spinning. "But…I don't understand. The people who are getting sick in H&H houses—"

"There's a hell-deep hole ripped through our town," Powell said, sharp enough to jolt through Nancy. "Hawkins is under quarantine because of whatever crazy shit it's releasing. I'd imagine that the people living right on top of it might be experiencing a symptom or two."

She could hear the echo of Jonathan's voice in Powell's words, and the dissonance was enough to drive her crazy. Add on the fact that this story was so similar to the one that Nancy had uncovered for herself? She didn't know which way was up anymore.

"How do you know all this?" she asked. "How did you figure this all out?"

Powell shifted where he stood, a rare sign of discomfort. "I think I've already told you more than enough."

But he didn't have to answer her question. Her mind was churning, connecting the dots perfectly well on its own. "Tyler," she said. "Tyler told you. He just *confessed*? To all of this?" The chief's jaw clenched. That was all the confirmation that Nancy needed. "Doesn't that seem a little crazy?" she asked. "A guy who killed two people just comes clean, out of the blue?"

"It's far from the craziest thing I've seen in my life," Powell shot back. "And at least this time, it's helping me out. I ain't about to look a gift horse in the mouth."

If he wouldn't, then Nancy would. "How long ago was this?" she asked. "When was he arrested?"

His expression was guarded. "Yesterday morning."

Yesterday morning. It just confirmed her suspicions. Because if Tyler Gorse had been locked up for so long, then there was no chance he'd also been at the bank tonight. Someone else had closed the vault door on Nancy. Someone else had moved the barrels once she'd broken free. Tyler Gorse might have been involved in this whole mess—*but he wasn't in it alone.*

Powell was studying her face when Nancy glanced back to him. "I don't like that look, Miss Wheeler."

She could tell him what she was thinking. She could tell him all of it. But he hadn't wanted to listen about the barrels. He hadn't wanted to listen about Tyler's confession. Why would he want to listen to this?

Solve the case, she told herself. *Write the story. Then everything will be good.*

She schooled her expression into a smile. "I'm just thinking about happy endings, Chief," she said. "I think we're all due for one. Don't you?"

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Chapter Twenty-Six

The radio booth was empty when Nancy entered the Squawk the next morning. This wouldn't have been unusual, except that Steve's BMW was once again parked out front, and Steve wouldn't be at the station if Robin wasn't.

"Robin?" Nancy called, pacing back out across the lobby. "Are you here?"

"Oh—hey, Nance."

Steve had emerged from the kitchenette. He had a half-empty bag of pretzels dangling from his fingers, and there were crumbs dusting his shirt. "I was just…cleaning."

She hadn't asked, but it was good to know that he was always going to be a terrible liar. "Is Robin here?" she asked, a rhetorical question.

"Downstairs," he said. She nodded, turning toward the basement steps, when he did a sort of awkward, aborted lunge-reach for her. "Actually, hey, do you have a sec?"

She'd spent the previous night almost getting gassed to death in the vault beneath Hawkins Credit Union, and with every second that passed, the person who tried to kill her slipped farther and farther out of her reach. But there was that kicked-puppy look on Steve's face, and he hadn't done anything to directly piss her off in the past couple of days, so—"Sure."

"I just wanted to—I mean, I wanted to check and see if—I mean, to see what you thought about—"

"Steve."

He tugged a hand through his hair. "I mean, jeez, Nance. I kind of…said some stuff."

Discomfort made her skin tight. She wanted to get the hell *out* of there. But there was no way to do that without making the situation worse. “You’ve said a lot of stuff,” she offered, a potential escape hatch.

He selfishly did not take her up on it. “I’m worried I kinda came on a little strong.”

When you told me you wanted me to pump out six of your kids so we could all travel the country packed into a van like a bunch of sardines? “No…”

“Sometimes my mouth just gets ahead of my brain, you know? I’m probably spending too much time with Robin. Shit, I’m probably doing it again now.”

Nancy shifted from foot to foot. “I really have to go find Robin.”

“No, totally, that’s…what you said. But.” *Why wouldn’t he take the out she was offering?* “I just wanted to…clear the air, you know? Let you know that…I’m okay if you’re okay. If we’re okay.”

Steve. Jonathan. Everyone wanted to know if they were “okay.” How could Nancy answer if she wasn’t entirely sure if they were? Or if she wasn’t entirely sure what *okay* even *was*?

Well, if she couldn’t respond honestly, then she wouldn’t respond at all. “I have to—”

His shoulders sagged. “Find Robin, sure.”

“—think about it,” she finished.

“Oh—sure. Sure!” His face brightened. “Think away. It’s what you do best.”

“Okay,” Nancy said. “Um—”

“Right—” He stepped aside, clearing the way toward the basement stairs. “I’ll be up here. So if you need me, just shout.”

She didn’t respond, because that would just have prolonged this conversation, and she’d already been through enough torment in the past twenty-four hours. With a sideways smile that hopefully didn’t convey *What the hell are you thinking?*, Nancy sidled past Steve and gratefully tromped down the basement stairs.

She found Robin crouched in front of the record shelves, sifting through the contents as she attempted to generate some kind of organization out of the chaos that Jimmy Lee had left behind. There were two piles building around her—presumably one for *Keep* and one for *Let the mice eat them*, but Nancy didn't know enough about music to understand the parameters.

She didn't look up as Nancy clattered down the stairs, though there was no way in hell that she hadn't heard her. "Hey," Nancy called, trotting over. "Are you busy? I have to tell you something."

"Mm" was all Robin said, as she flipped a record sleeve over to read the back.

Weird. Normally it was a struggle to get Robin to *stop* talking. "I found something weird last night," Nancy said, reaching behind the shelf to retrieve the conspiracy board. "*Really* weird."

Robin put the record in one of the piles. "At Hawkins Credit Union?"

Nancy paused, the conspiracy board propped against her shins. "Uh—yeah. How did you—"

Robin finally looked up at her. The flatness behind her eyes was unsettling. "What did you find?"

"Um." Nancy shifted. "Hey, are you okay?"

"I'm great. What did you find?"

"These—all these barrels. Full of chemicals. It's what's been getting people sick, I think." Nancy shook her head. "You knew I went there?"

"I heard."

"This morning?"

"Last night."

"*How*?"

Robin snorted. "Oh, now you wanna know what I was up to? Okay, let's take a little saunter through my evening. I get back from work. I grab dinner. I go up to my room. I turn on my radio. And what do I hear?" She stood, and now there was a spark in her eyes, burning away the flatness. "The Wheeler girl called in with a crazy story about some toxic waste at Hawkins Credit Union. The Wheeler girl looks like hell. Actually, the Wheeler girl almost got herself *killed*."

“You heard that on the radio?” A memory flashed through Nancy’s mind. “You heard it on your police scanner.”

“Jesus, Nancy, is that what you’re focusing on?”

Nancy crossed her arms. “Fine, yes, I’m sorry. But listen. Those barrels. They disappeared. Someone *moved them* as soon as I left the bank.”

“Why didn’t you call me?”

“By the time the cops let me go, it was so late—like, almost three in the morning.”

“Not *after,*” Robin said. “Before. When you first got the bright idea to start poking around in HCU’s basement. I’m guessing it wasn’t the middle of the night then. Why didn’t you tell me what you were planning?”

“It was just a hunch,” Nancy said. Why was Robin *mad* at her? “And you were at work. I didn’t want to mess up your whole life for something that might not have turned out to be anything at all.” She realized she was gripping her hands together, unconsciously begging. She forced herself to flex her fingers open, to drop her arms to her sides. “I’m not trying to”—*how had Jonathan put it?*—“to get you to skip to the end of the book with me.”

“What the hell is that even supposed to mean?” Robin demanded.

“It means I want to respect the life you’ve got outside of all this stuff!” Nancy exclaimed. “Why are you pissed off right now? I was doing you a favor!”

“A f—” Robin laughed through the end of the word. “When have I ever asked for that?”

“You didn’t have to.”

“No, I didn’t ask because that’s *not what I want*!”

“It turned out fine,” Nancy said, a little helpless in the face of Robin’s outburst. “I got the vault door open before anything terrible could happen.”

Robin gaped at her. “The vault door was *shut*?!”

“Someone…closed it on me.”

“*Nancy.* This is why—oh my God.” Robin paced in a circle. She was back to avoiding Nancy’s eyes, like she couldn’t bear to look at her. “If it

comes down to your life or my stupid *shift at the Squawk,* I will *leave work*."

"Well, how was I supposed to know that?!"

"Because I've been *telling you since graduation*. Since Joey called my house. Since I helped you track him down at the ceremony. Or even—before then. Since the funeral home, or any of the ten million other pointless little capers we've done together. But you've been so busy hanging out at the end of the book—which, what a pretentious reference, where the hell did you even *get* that?—that you haven't been *listening.* I mean, oh my God, you haven't even asked me why I have a police scanner in my bedroom."

Nancy clenched her jaw. Robin was right, but that didn't mean that Nancy was going to ask *now*. But that didn't seem to make a difference to Robin, whose earlier reticence had evaporated without a trace.

"I hate that stupid thing," Robin went on, "but I listen to it every single night. Like poking a bruise. I am completely terrified that one day I'll hear some cop talking about somebody I know—somebody who wound up like Joey. My parents. Steve. Dustin or Lucas or Mike or Will. But I can't stop tuning in, because—because what if that cop is talking about one of my people and I *don't* hear it? That's even worse. Do you get that?" Robin shook her head. "No, of course you don't. That's why your name was the one on the radio last night. It was like a freaking *nightmare,* Nancy."

"But I'm okay."

"You're still not listening. *I'm not."* Robin kicked the box of records. It skidded halfway across the floor. "I've been so scared of losing somebody—*anybody*—that I've been closing myself off from—from new people. And you're just out there, running around by yourself like it doesn't matter."

Nancy was surprised at the rage building inside her. *There's no way to win. You try to bring someone in, they tell you to leave them alone. You leave someone alone, they're pissed you didn't bring them in*. "If you want a therapist, then you're gonna have to pay someone," Nancy bit out.

"I want—" Robin lost steam, sagging in on herself. "I want to turn off the scanner. I want to not be afraid."

Nancy gritted her teeth. “I can’t help you with that,” she said. “But good luck.” And with that, she turned on her heel, hauling the conspiracy board up the stairs and leaving Robin and her records behind her.

If she’s not going to help me…then I’ll just have to do it alone.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

Nancy was still fuming as she hauled the conspiracy board up to her room. There was nowhere to stash it here—nowhere that a snooping family member wouldn't come across it. She laid the board across her bed and stood over it, her arms crossed, chewing on her lip as she contemplated her next move.

Apologize to Robin, suggested an unhelpful voice in the back of her mind. She shook her head, trying to dislodge it, and chewed her lip harder.

She didn't need Robin. She didn't need anybody. She could chase down the rest of this story by herself. And now that she took a minute to stand here and think, she knew exactly where to start.

Tyler Gorse. The man who'd confessed—falsely—to being behind two murders. Why had he done it? Who was he covering for?

She wasn't going to find out standing around in her own house. Shoving the board under her bed, Nancy grabbed her purse and headed back out the door.

It took an hour of waiting outside the Hawkins police station until she saw Chief Powell stride out the front doors and climb into his cruiser, but the second he was gone, she was jumping out of her car and trotting into the station.

Over the past few years, straight-A Nancy Wheeler had spent *way* more time at the Hawkins Police Station than she'd ever have imagined possible. Between all the fights and investigations, Nancy had even begun thinking of a specific chair (the one next to the window by the filing cabinets) as *hers.* But today, when she looked for it, she was a little surprised to find that it wasn't there.

Furniture moved. Even in buildings where nothing had changed in fifty years, furniture moved. But now that Nancy scanned the room, she could see that her chair wasn't the only thing missing. Everywhere she looked were signs of emptiness, like a third of the office had been scooped away, and the remainder had been spread out to fill the leftover space. Desks were bare, drawers were open, shelves were empty. The exodus that had hit Hawkins hadn't exactly left the police force untouched.

Still, it wasn't like the department was devoid of life. There had been Chief Powell, obviously, before some minor crisis had summoned him away. And there was Flo, the station's secretary, who checked Nancy into the building even as she kept up a steady conversation on the phone. The sidelong look she gave Nancy said clearly that whoever was on the other end of the line would be getting a play-by-play of Nancy's visit, and given the phone tree of gossip that ran through Hawkins, Nancy's entire family would know that she had come here by the time she got home for dinner.

"Phil!" Flo called over her shoulder. Across the room, Nancy saw Officer Callahan's head pop up from behind a stack of files, then quickly duck back down, like he was hoping she hadn't seen him. "Phil!" Flo shouted again. "Are you going to answer this young woman's questions?"

It probably wasn't protocol for an officer to sigh loudly in the face of his civic duty, but Callahan did it anyway. He stuck a hand over his mountain of unfiled paperwork, waving Nancy over. "Come on."

Nancy smiled her thanks at Flo and made her way over to Officer Callahan, bypassing unused desks as she went. "Nancy Wheeler, right?" Callahan asked as she sank down in the chair across from him.

"Good memory."

He straightened up in his seat. "I know. What do you want? Did you find another dead body? Seems like that's kind of your thing."

Nancy let his brash tone wash past her. "Not today," she said. "I'm actually here as an employee of *The Hawkins Post*."

He peered at her through his thick glasses. "Are you serious? What are you, fifteen?"

Nancy laughed obligingly. “That’s very funny, Officer Callahan. But no.” She cocked her head. “You should have been expecting me. My editor called ahead. He spoke with Chief Powell?”

Callahan frowned. “He did?”

“Oh yes. After all the unfortunate chaos the last few weeks—Joey Taft, Georgia Miller—the staff of *The Post* think that the people of Hawkins deserve to know that the culprit is behind bars. We’re putting together an exposé on Tyler Gorse. And on the people who caught him, of course.”

“Chief Powell cleared this?”

Nancy’s smile didn’t budge. “That’s right.”

“And you’re here to—” Callahan’s mustache twitched as a realization hit him. “You’re here to interview *us*?”

“That’s right,” Nancy chirped. “We’re really interested in getting a snapshot of how the police force is functioning in this new Hawkins.”

Callahan glanced past Nancy at the barren desks. “Functioning…”

“Exactly. But first—” Nancy braced herself for her big swing. “I need to interview Tyler Gorse.”

Callahan might have been a little clueless, but even he was taken aback by that request. “The *murderer*?”

“My editor called ahead,” Nancy said again, hoping that a double application of that lie would sweeten things for Callahan. “I should be cleared to speak with him.”

“Uh…” Callahan’s eyes darted around the room as he tried to remember what the correct protocol was in this situation. “I’m pretty sure that’s not allowed.”

“Of course it is,” Nancy said. “Journalists are always able to speak with the incarcerated, provided that they’ve cleared it with the appropriate authorities first.”

This was true, which bolstered Nancy’s case. But it also served to jog Callahan’s memory, which wasn’t helpful. “Right,” he said, recollection sparking. “If you’re on the perp’s list of approved visitors. Does that Tyler guy know you’re coming?”

Shit. She'd been hoping that Callahan wouldn't remember that part. Of course she wasn't on Tyler's list of approved visitors. He barely knew that she existed.

Still, she had one card left to play. "He'll want to talk to me," she said. "Just tell him I want to hear his story—his *and his partner's*."

Nancy could see that Callahan was still dubious, but prodding her for more information would have required that he give a damn—and that he was looking to do more work. And since *that* certainly wasn't the case, he just shook his head and told her to stay where she was. Then he disappeared down one of the narrow halls that led off the main office space, presumably in the direction of the holding cells.

Nancy occupied herself by trying to read the posters plastered up on the other side of the room. A ripped and faded notice that asked DO YOU WANT TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE? JOIN THE HAWKINS POLICE FORCE TODAY! took up most of the wall space, but there were a slew of WANTED: FOR QUESTIONING mugshots as well. Nancy recognized Eleven's face among them with a start. HAVE YOU SEEN THIS GIRL? The poster asked. It seemed as though the military was not about to abandon their search for Jane Hopper.

She could hear Flo muttering a constant commentary into her phone, staring at Nancy the whole time. Nancy gritted her teeth into a pleasant smile and resisted the urge to glare at her.

Finally, after ten interminable minutes, Nancy could hear footsteps in the hallway. She shot to her feet as Callahan emerged.

"He'll give you five minutes," Callahan said.

Nancy could have punched the air. "Wonderful," she said, as sedately as she could. "Then I will take five minutes."

Officer Callahan led her down the hallway and through a locked, barred door. "I'll be right out here," he told her as she stepped through. "If you need anything, I guess…just shout?"

"We'll be fine," Nancy said. "Thank you, Officer Callahan."

Tyler Gorse was sprawled across his cot when Nancy approached the cells. He had one arm flung over both eyes, blotting out the midday sun that filtered through the high, narrow window, and his legs were stretched out

long, crossed at the ankles. He looked more relaxed as an accused murderer behind bars than Nancy had ever felt, even at home in her own bed.

"Mr. Gorse?"

Tyler peeked under the crook of his elbow at the sound of Nancy's voice. "I heard you had a few questions for me."

There was a folding chair next to the cinder block wall. Nancy pulled it around so that it faced Tyler through the cell bars, and sank down onto it. "That's right."

"You're that kid from the construction site. The reporter."

"Yes."

"And you were at H&H that night."

That night. No need to specify which night it was. "Yep."

Nancy leaned forward. "I was also at Hawkins Credit Union."

He didn't move. He didn't react. And *that* was the tell. Every muscle in his body had locked up, just for a split second—long enough for Nancy to know that her words had found their mark.

"Making a withdrawal?" he asked, once it seemed like he'd remembered how to breathe again.

But now that she'd spotted the gap in his armor, she wasn't about to play this game. "Kind of tricky, since the whole building has been condemned. But you knew that, right? It was a Hearth & Home project."

Tyler's arm finally dropped away from his face. He slid to a seat, facing her, elbows propped on his knees in a last stab at feigned nonchalance. "I thought you wanted to ask me a few questions. I'm not hearing any."

She was getting to him. Nancy pressed forward. "I wanted to ask you a few questions *about your partner*."

He let out a dismissive snort. It must have sounded fake even to him. "See, this is why I told Callahan to let you back here." He leaned toward her. "You've got it all wrong. I don't have a partner."

Despite her best efforts, Robin's voice filtered back to Nancy. "*Sometimes you can come on a little…strong.*"

Fine. If directness wasn't going to get Tyler to crack, then she could ask her questions from a different angle.

“Okay,” Nancy said easily. She leaned forward as well, mirroring his posture. “In that case, let me just say—you’re a smart man, Mr. Gorse. I knew it the second we met. So you understand that the accusations against you are…well, they’re serious.”

“Murder is serious, kid. Can we get to the point?”

Easy, easy. Nancy’s gentle smile did not shift from her face. “I was just coming to it. Serious accusations, serious murder. And the thing that makes it all even *more* serious—like, *dire*—is that it happened in this new Hawkins. Because I know you’ve been doing the disaster-relief reconstruction thing for a while now, but how many times have you done it under military quarantine?”

There was a creak from his side of the bars. He was shifting on his cot, just a little uncomfortable. Maybe there was something to this soft-handed approach. “There are about to be a *ton* of eyes on you. This case. All of it. So if there’s something in your story that’s not adding up—”

“What story?” he demanded, cutting her off. “They got me for killing Georgia. They got me for killing that kid at the bridge—”

He’d killed Joey and he didn’t even know his name. An icicle of anger stabbed through Nancy. “His name was Joey.”

“Whatever. I copped to it. I’m cooperating with them. So what’s worse than murder? What would I possibly be lying about?”

He was getting too loud. If he kept this up, then Callahan would come to check on them and this conversation would be over. She leaned in closer, dropping her voice and hoping that Tyler would do the same. “I was at Hawkins Credit Union,” she said again. “Last night.”

“So?” he demanded. There was a flush rising in his cheeks—anger or panic or a mixture of the two.

“I was in the vault,” she said, as calmly and steadily as she could manage. Was that a sound from over her shoulder? Was someone coming down the hall? “I saw what was hidden there.”

A muscle jumped in Tyler’s jaw. He sat back against the bare wall, folding his arms over his chest. And since he wasn’t speaking up to cut Nancy off, she kept talking. “Chemical waste,” she said. “Barrels of it. All

stashed in an open trench in the basement floor. My guess is that the next step would have been to bury the barrels, to fill in the trench with concrete. Nobody would ever even know they were there. Until, of course—people started getting sick. People you were supposed to be *helping*."

"We're done here." The words barely made it past Tyler's gritted teeth. His hands were balled into fists where they pressed into his chest. Nancy could see the skin over his knuckles whitening.

"*I'm* not," Nancy said. "Because last night, somebody locked me in the vault at that bank. And once I escaped, someone removed every barrel. And if you've been in this cell that whole time…"

There it was again. Tyler's tell. Whenever he had something to hide, he went statue-still, like if he didn't move, Nancy would forget that he was even there. "I don't know anything about that fucking vault," he finally said.

Nancy shrugged, feigning nonchalance just as badly as Tyler had been. But how could she be expected to keep her cool when that fuzzing pulse of electric *I think I'm onto something* was thrumming down her spine? "I think you know a *few* things about it," she said. "But sure, you might not know what happened there *last night*. Because that wasn't you. That was your partner."

"I told you—"

"I know what you told me, Mr. Gorse. It was a lie. You're working with someone."

"You can keep digging all you want," Tyler said. "But I'm done playing your little game, okay? You got me. Look. I'm behind bars. I'm not going anywhere."

He sounded almost…happy about it. That, more than anything, was what made her realize…Tyler *wanted* to take this fall. He wasn't sorry he'd been caught. He was in there *on purpose.*

"You think," Nancy said slowly, "you're on your way out of here. Right?"

Tyler's mouth thinned.

“You think they’re going to ship you out of Hawkins to stand trial. And someone—your partner—promised you that as soon as you get to Indianapolis or D.C. or…wherever you’re headed, you think you’re going to walk right out of police custody and into a big payout.”

Tyler’s jaw tightened again. He didn’t deny it. And in a flash, Nancy was through with the gentle approach. It was time to hit Tyler with a cold dose of reality.

“Listen to me, Mr. Gorse,” she said, fast and low. “That might be what they told you, but you *have* to know—that’s not what’s going to happen. Joey Taft thought he was going to get a payout, didn’t he? And Georgia *worked* with you—she was part of your whole operation. Look what happened to her.”

“Georgia.” Tyler sneered the name, like he couldn’t help himself. “She wasn’t—”

He cut himself off. Whatever he’d been on the cusp of saying, it had been off-limits. But Nancy had heard enough to fill in the blanks. “Georgia *wasn’t* working with you?”

Tyler clenched his jaw, refusing to speak. But Nancy had a handle on his tells now. She could read him like a book.

“No,” Nancy mused. “She was. Once. But not anymore. And that’s why you killed her.”

“We didn’t have a choice,” Tyler spat. “But after that *suit* showed up—”

“Suit?” *A black sedan. A crisp white collar. Ridiculous sunglasses*. Agent Marquez’s face swam into Nancy’s memory, coalescing out of the fog.

Tyler just crossed his arms tighter against his chest, his face a thundercloud. “I think we’re done here,” Tyler said.

No. She still didn’t know who he was working with. “Just one more minute—”

“Officer!” Tyler called. Nancy could hear the jingle of Callahan’s keys out in the hallway. In a second, he was going to be in there, and this interview would be over.

So she'd have to be quick. "Listen to me, *please.* I'm just—I'm telling you how this is probably going to go. Right now, you're a convenient scapegoat. You had a hand in every horrible thing that's happened in Hawkins over the last couple of weeks. It's easy to say you were the only person behind it. But whoever you're working with, they can't afford loose ends. You're a loose end, Mr. Gorse. And we both know what happens to those."

Tyler's face was pale, his eyes wide and fearful. He stared at Nancy like he was just now finally hearing her—and like her words scared the hell out of him.

Good. They were true.

"We can get you out of this," she whispered. "It's not too late. But first you have to come clean. Tell me who your partner is, and we can make sure that they stay far, far away from you."

Tyler hadn't blinked in a long minute. "I—"

The cell door opened. Officer Callahan tumbled inside. "Everyone, uh… okay in here?"

Nancy didn't look away from Tyler. "Come on, Tyler. You can do this. It doesn't have to go this way—"

"I think you should probably get away from the bars, Miss Wheeler," Callahan ventured. Nancy complied, putting a couple of long steps between herself and the cell—but she still held Tyler's gaze. *Please,* she thought. *Please please please—*

He turned away. Without another word, he climbed back onto his cot and rolled onto his side, arms wrapped around himself as he faced the wall. The last thing Nancy saw before Callahan ushered her out was Tyler's back, hunched over into a terrified fetal position. There was no more nonchalant mask on Tyler Gorse. This was a man who had just learned that no matter what, he was headed for the end.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

Nancy might not have gotten the name of his partner out of Tyler, but she didn't leave the police station empty-handed.

"After that suit showed up…"

The mysterious Agent Marquez was here in Hawkins because of Georgia. She'd turned whistleblower, somehow. She must have. But what, exactly, had she been telling Marquez? What had he come here to do?

Georgia was beyond spilling the answers. But Marquez wasn't. All Nancy had to do was find him.

It didn't take more than a minute at a pay phone for Nancy to make certain that he hadn't been staying at either of the two motels inside the quarantine zone. And the fact that he hadn't been tooling around town in a tactical vehicle made her reasonably certain that he hadn't been crashing in the military barracks either.

Think this through, Nancy told herself, stepping out of the phone booth and into the golden light of sunset. *He's here because of Georgia. He's here because of Hearth & Home. And if there was one thing that Hearth & Home had plenty of access to, it was empty houses.*

Once again, Nancy dug out the list of properties that she and Robin had cobbled together in Georgia's office. *How many of them were abandoned, like the one the Byers family had bought?*

The only way she was going to be able to narrow her search was to get out there and look for herself. Resigning herself to a night behind the wheel, Nancy climbed into her station wagon and started the engine.

Three hours and seven properties later, Nancy pulled to a stop outside a house on the south side of town. It was a tiny bungalow on a large lot at the

end of a quiet street, and from the outside it looked as abandoned and empty as the other houses she'd visited that evening.

But none of those other homes had featured a calculatedly nondescript sedan parked at the front curb.

This is it. Nancy marched to the front door, certainty flooding her veins. She did both herself and the house's residents a favor by knocking instead of barging right on in. A moment later, the dusty curtain obscuring the front window twitched as someone inside snuck a look. Then, after an uncomfortable pause, the door unlocked, swinging inward to reveal Agent Marquez. She'd only met him twice, but there was still something baseline unsettling about seeing him out of his government-issued black suit. As he squinted painfully into the glare of her flashlight, he kept a steady grip on his service weapon—pointed right at her head. "Miss Wheeler?" he grated, his voice sandpapery with sleep.

"Hi," she said. "Sorry if I woke you up."

"You didn't," he lied. He still hadn't lowered his gun. "Um. What. Why are you here?"

"I wanted to talk," Nancy said. She aimed her flashlight toward the ground—a peace offering. "About Hearth & Home."

Even in the dim light, Nancy could see Agent Marquez's eyes widen in recognition. Finally—*finally*—he holstered his weapon. "You better come inside."

Marquez had done a good job at making himself at home with no power or water. Cases of water bottles were stacked in the corner next to a small camping stove and a box of canned food. As Nancy watched, Marquez picked his way through the gloomy living room and flicked the switch on a heavy-duty battery-powered camping lantern. The warm yellow glow illuminated the pile of couch cushions that had been dragged to the floor and the rumpled sleeping bag on top of them.

"Homey," she said.

"I didn't think I'd be *entertaining*," he grumbled, digging one of the cushions out of his makeshift nest and plopping it back onto the sofa.

“Make yourself comfortable. And then you can tell me what you know about H&H.”

She settled onto the couch, politely ignoring the stray sock draped across the armrest. Marquez pulled a dining room chair over from the little dinette set in the unused kitchen and did his best to look intimidating and unapproachable as he sank down on it, folding his arms over his chest. “I know they’re poisoning people,” she told him. “I know they’re taking advantage of natural disasters to dispose of toxic waste.” She folded her arms too. “And I know that Georgia Miller was going to blow the whistle on all of it. And that’s why she was murdered.”

There was a long moment of quiet. “You figured this out on your own?” Marquez finally asked.

Nancy swallowed down some thick emotion. “I had help,” she said.

“Joey Taft.”

“And a few others. But yeah, Joey was the one who figured it out first. He was going to tell me and…my friend…when he was killed.”

Agent Marquez ran a hand through his hair. “Not before he told Georgia Miller.”

Georgia must have told him. “Joey had tried to blackmail her when he realized that H&H was responsible for how sick his grandmother was. Is that when she reached out to you?”

“Before,” said Agent Marquez. “Georgia first talked to the EPA when she learned that H&H’s next project was Hawkins, Indiana.”

“*I didn’t want to come back to Hawkins.*” That was what Georgia had said at graduation almost two weeks ago. At the time, Nancy had taken it as another person whose heart bled for their hurting hometown. Now those words had taken on a much darker meaning.

Georgia hadn’t regretted the disaster that had hit Hawkins. She’d been regretting the disaster that she and her company were about to inflict on it.

“EPA,” Nancy echoed. Her voice sounded as hollow as she felt inside. “That’s who you’re with?”

Marquez shrugged, a little sheepish. “It’s not the most glamorous agency. Still, we get the badge and the gun. And given the havoc that H&H

and their toxic waste are inflicting on this town, this case is pretty firmly in our wheelhouse. Do you want a cup of tea?"

"Wait." Nancy felt like her mind was hovering ten miles above her body. "So if you've known that Hawkins is being used as a dump site, why haven't you done anything about it?" Across the room, Marquez was on his knees fiddling with his camp stove, trying to get the propane canister to work, and the fidgeting was doing nothing to calm Nancy's fizzing anger. "You've been here for weeks now," she said. The threads of her sweatshirt were straining under the wrench of her fingers. "At least. And you're spending all your time—squatting?"

"It's not that simple, Miss Wheeler." He cracked a water bottle open and poured the contents into a little kettle before setting it on the stove.

"Isn't it?" If she gripped at her sleeves any harder, she'd tear right through them. She forced herself to relax, to drop her hands into her lap. "Call me crazy, but I guess I'm just a little sick of government agencies hovering around safe and sound on the outskirts while the people in this town *die*."

"There's no *government agency* in Hawkins right now," Marquez said, sinking back on his heels as he waited for the water to boil. He looked tired —an exhaustion that ran way deeper than one night's interrupted sleep. "Not if you're talking about the EPA. There's just me. I managed to talk my way in here with a military convoy early in the quarantine on the grounds that I'd keep any investigation surface-level and *wouldn't make waves*. Things were fine for a while, but then Georgia—you know. And the army made it clear they wanted me gone. As far as they know, I complied. But I've just been lying low ever since."

The bleakness in his voice made Nancy's throat dry. "You can't—I don't know. Call for backup?"

He laughed, a little bitter. "There is no backup. With all the military interference, I can't even get a message out." He stared blankly into the steam that had begun spiraling from the kettle. "It's just me in here. I'm al —It's just me."

He'd bitten off the word, but Nancy had heard it loud and clear. *Alone.* Nancy tried not to feel the edges of it bouncing against the inside of her skull. "Why didn't you *leave*?" she asked, gesturing at the bleak space around them. "Why stay, if this is how you're staying?"

"I don't want to go empty-handed," he said. "I'd never be able to get back into Hawkins. But getting evidence—*proof*—is starting to feel next to impossible. I just can't get into these properties." He poured bubbling water into an unwashed mug and dunked in a tea bag. "The owners aren't exactly rolling out the red carpet, not when they think that H&H has just saved their homes and businesses. I could have tried for a warrant, before I disappeared, but it's not like the military authorities here prioritize those for other government agencies."

"And asking for a warrant would have probably qualified as *making waves*," Nancy said.

"Bingo." Marquez snapped his fingers at her. "The best-case scenario right now—and I'm using *best* very loosely here—is for me to collect whatever evidence I can and then get it *out* of Hawkins."

"But without being able to get into the properties…"

"It's a catch-22. No evidence, no warrant. No warrant, no entry. No entry, no evidence." Marquez stood with a groan before resettling in his dinette chair. "Georgia thought she could get me something good. Something *solid*."

Nancy perked up. "Solid like what? Documents? Photographs? Data? Samples?"

"Who knows," Marquez said. "Before she could deliver…you know."

It wasn't hard to summon the memory of rattling, struggling breaths—a sodden, blood-soaked sweatshirt beneath Nancy's hands. The hard part was pushing the image aside again. "Then it must be around somewhere," she said. "Georgia was into hiding stuff. We—" She broke off for a moment as the near-mention of Robin sent a pang through her. "I found a spot in her office where she stashed a couple things—a tape of her call with Joey, a few bank statements—"

"Bank statements?" Marquez perked up. "Do you still have those?"

Nancy shook her head. “Whoever killed her took them. I have the tape. But that’s…”

“Circumstantial,” Marquez filled in. “At best.”

“Listen,” Nancy said, leaning forward. “If Georgia was putting together the kind of evidence you think she was, she wouldn’t have kept it in her office. It’s somewhere in Hawkins.”

She looked eagerly to Marquez, expecting to find some excited spark flaring in his eyes. But he just looked tired and sad. “It’s not,” he said. “I’ve been looking ever since she died. If Georgia ever got around to putting something together, then her killers took it.”

Nancy shook her head. “No.”

“Look around, Miss Wheeler,” Agent Marquez said. “You’re sitting in an abandoned house with a government agent who hasn’t washed his clothes in a week. This case is finished.”

“*No*,” Nancy insisted. “Georgia followed through. She wouldn’t have just let this die with her. I’ll find whatever she left for you—”

“With all due respect, Miss Wheeler—how?”

“I—I’ll—”

She realized, with growing agitation, that she didn’t have an answer. She’d been so sure that she’d figure out her next step here, once she’d talked to Agent Marquez. He was supposed to be *on mission*, just like her… but he just seemed *lost*. And if he was lost, then where did that leave her?

Maybe he saw this playing out on her face, because his sad eyes softened. “Listen. Nancy. I know that my warnings have seemed ridiculous to you. Believe it or not, I was eighteen, once upon a time. I remember how annoying it was when older people told me to stay away from dangerous things. But you *know* that this case is dangerous. And you know why I have to tell you—stand down.” He shook his head. “The bad guys won, for now.”

“I can’t just…let them get away with it.”

“Then live to fight another day,” Marquez said. “When we get out of here—once the quarantine lifts, or maybe before, if we’re lucky—we’ll track them down. Whoever killed Georgia, Joey, whoever’s behind H&H—we’ll figure it out. But for now…it’s over.”

It was so similar to the assurances Jonathan had given her at Farrier Family Funeral Home that it set Nancy's teeth on edge. "*We just might not find him tonight.*"

Nancy's stomach roiled, rebelling against the memory. "What if they hurt someone else?"

"Here—" Digging into one of the duffel bags slumped against the wall, Marquez emerged with something bulky and rectangular. He presented it to Nancy. "Have you ever used one of these?"

Staring down at the walkie-talkie, Nancy fought back the hysterical urge to laugh. "Once or twice."

"Keep it on you. Let me know if something comes up. And *stay safe*, Miss Wheeler." Marquez pressed the walkie into her hand. "It's all any of us can do."

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

Letterman had already aired and ended by the time Nancy let herself in the front door. The lights were out throughout the house. There wasn't even the glow of the television to light the way.

That suited Nancy just fine. She didn't want any witnesses to the hollow look on her face as she trudged for the stairs without stopping to shuck her jacket.

The bad guys won.

But they can't, she thought, wincing at how whiny that sounded even inside her head. Of course they could. Bad guys won all the time.

"Let us take a moment to remember the classmates that could not be here with us today."

We got those guys, she thought, defiant. *The Demogorgon, the Russians, Hawkins Lab. We got them.*

What about Vecna? What about the Mind Flayer? Have you stopped them?

They can't hide forever. I'll find them.

Are you sure about that?

It was an unnerving feeling, not knowing the answer to her own question. Especially when it was a question she'd been so certain of two days before. Nancy stepped out onto the second-floor landing, feeling every inch of the storm cloud over her head.

Get some sleep, she told herself. *Things will be clearer in the morning.*

But sleep wasn't in the cards, at least not yet. Before Nancy could push through her bedroom door, her mother stuck her head into the hallway from the bathroom. "Nancy?"

“Oh—hi, Mom. Sorry, I know it’s late. I was working on a story for Sean.”

“I wish you had called. Especially after Georgia. I worry about you.”

Mom shook a Diazepam out of a prescription bottle and popped it in her mouth, washing it down with a sip from her glass—not water, like Nancy had initially assumed, but white wine. When she shoved the pill bottle into her robe’s pocket, Nancy noticed that her mother’s hand was shaking.

“Yeah.” Nancy grimaced. “I’m actually super tired, so I’m going to—”

“I left something for you on your bed.”

Curious, Nancy opened her bedroom door and looked inside. There, in the middle of her quilt, was her battered Emerson registration packet. The packet she’d stashed away.

“The deadline to return that is soon, isn’t it?” her mother asked. “Actually, I think—I think we’ll have to get it in the mail tomorrow, if it’s going to get to Boston on time.”

Nancy glanced back at her mom. She was dressed for bed, her nightgown tied haphazardly around her waist and slippers on her feet. She cradled her brimming glass of sauvignon in one manicured hand.

“I’m glad I found that packet,” her mom went on, stepping around Nancy and into the bedroom. “Who knows what might’ve happened if we’d missed that deadline? I know you’ve got a lot going on, Nancy, but you’re going to have to learn how to handle a complicated to-do list. It’s just part of growing up.”

“I can manage a to-do list.”

“Mm,” Mom hummed, tilting her head. There was a little more wobble in the movement than normal. The wine sloshed in her glass, some slopping over the rim, as she sank down onto Nancy’s bed. “Come on, let’s get it done now.”

The hollow pit in Nancy’s stomach was just getting deeper. “I’m kind of tired.”

“There’ll be plenty of all-nighters once you get to college,” her mother said. She patted the quilt next to her. “Let’s make this the first one.”

How did she feel claustrophobic in her own room? It felt like the walls were closing in on her. “Can we do this in the morning?”

“*No,* Nancy. *Now*.”

The sharpness of her mother’s voice sent Nancy’s gaze snapping over to her. For the first time, she noticed the gray tinge to her mom’s face. She looked tired—almost as tired as Agent Marquez had, squatting in his borrowed house. But in contrast to her exhausted expression was the manic, desperate glint in her eye. “I just don’t understand why you’re suddenly so resistant to this,” Mom went on. She drained a gulp of wine out of her glass. “College is everything you’ve worked toward for *years*. You’ve dreamed about this ever since you were little. Sweetheart. I know it’s been a stressful few days—a stressful few years, really—but don’t lose focus now. You’re so close to the finish line.”

Tears stung at Nancy’s eyes. “I know.”

Mom’s jaw was tight. “Then why won’t you just fill out this damn packet?”

“Because—because I *can’t*.”

The second she said it, she realized it was true. The reason she hadn’t filled out the packet was the same reason she hadn’t been able to respond to Agent Marquez. It was the reason her bone-deep certainty that they would find Vecna, that they would make the bad guys pay, was shaking. Maybe it had never been solid to begin with. Maybe she’d been lying to herself for months, because she was too afraid of reality to face it.

But now that she’d cracked that door, she couldn’t stop the words from tumbling out. “I just—I think I’m going to have to stay here.”

Her mother was staring into the middle distance, shaking her head like it was loose. “No,” she said again. “You’re tired. You said you’re tired. That’s all right. We’ll revisit this in the morning.”

“Mom, I’m serious. I don’t think I’m going to be able to leave Hawkins.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake—*why*?” Mom threw one hand up in the air. “I’m all ears, Nancy.”

Because I've been living at the end of the story this whole time, and there's still a good chunk of middle to go. Because until an interdimensional villain makes his next move, I can't go anywhere. Because I don't have a choice.

She couldn't say any of that, of course. She had to settle for an incredibly weak "I just—I can't go."

Mom studied her face for a long moment. Whatever she saw there sent her sagging in on herself, closing her eyes. "I knew it," she whispered. "I didn't want to think it was true—but I knew it."

Nancy had some very real doubt about that. "Mom, you just—you have to trust me. This is the only way—"

"No." Mom drew herself up straight, both hands wrapped around the wineglass in her lap. "It isn't. I thought you knew this. Maybe it's my fault for never saying it aloud. Better late than never, I suppose." She dropped her voice so Nancy had to lean in to hear her. "No boy is worth your future."

Nancy blinked, convinced for a long moment that she'd misheard her mother. "No boy…is worth…what?"

"Now you're both eighteen," Mom went on, unhearing, "and I know better than to forbid you from seeing him. You just—you have to listen to your common sense, Nancy. Whatever life he's promising you here in Hawkins, it's not yours. You know that. You've always been such a smart young woman—"

"Mom—Mom—" The conversation had taken a left turn that Nancy hadn't seen coming, but it was starting to put a few things into perspective that she hadn't even realized were out of focus. "Do you think I'm staying here for *Jonathan*?"

"I know you love him," Mom said. "But—"

"Wait," Nancy said. There was a high-pitched ringing in her ears. The last twenty-four hours had sucked *way* too much for her to be having this conversation right now. "Is this—" She stopped, retracting the question. There was no sense in asking a question she already knew the answer to.

“This is why you’ve been so cold to him. You thought—you were worried that I was going to settle down. Here. With him.”

“And now…” Mom spread her hands. *See what you’ve done?*

Fiery rage licked suddenly through Nancy, lighting her up from the ends of her hair to the soles of her feet. *Stay here for a* boy*?* Nancy was giving up her *dream* because she had no other option. It was like her mother didn’t know her at all.

But that wasn’t the reason for the flash-paper anger igniting Nancy’s insides, or at least, not the entire reason. It was the fact that Nancy couldn’t explain her true motive for staying, that she was powerless to defend herself against her mother’s twisted new view of her. She was stuck with that new persona, in Mom’s eyes, just like she was stuck in Hawkins.

“I’m staying here,” she said, feeling acid burn her tongue on every word. “That’s all you need to know. If you want me to move out, then fine. I’ll figure something out. But I’ll be in Hawkins. I can’t go—” Bubbly panic abruptly welled inside of her chest, smothering her.

“Nancy,” her mother said, reaching for one of Nancy’s hands. “You don’t have to lie to me. I understand. Nobody understands more than I do.” She flinched at Nancy’s derisive snort but pressed on. “It feels like it’s what you’re *supposed* to do. You meet a boy, you marry him, you start a family. It’s easy.”

Another plume of rage flared, burning through every molecule of oxygen in Nancy’s lungs. It clamped down around her ribs. Had breathing always been this difficult? Maybe it had been and she just hadn’t noticed until the exits had been blocked.

“You think I want that?” Nancy’s mouth twisted into an ugly sneer. “A boy, a wedding, a family. You think I want to be *like you*?” Her laugh had teeth. A tiny, nasty part of herself hoped that those teeth were sharp enough to draw blood.

“No.” There was steel in Mom’s soft voice. She set her glass down on Nancy’s nightstand and stood, forcing Nancy to look up into her face. “I don’t.”

“Right!” Nancy yanked her hand out of her mother’s. “And you know what? *You* don’t want me to be like you, either. Actually, I think it would be your worst *nightmare* if I turned out anything like you. Stuck in this house or—this town or—this *life*.”

“Nancy,” Mom said, a warning glint in her eyes. But that burning anger had taken over Nancy, and Nancy welcomed it. It was familiar and warm and *certain*, in a way that everything else very suddenly wasn’t. If all else failed, at least she could be angry.

“No, Mom, I’m not staying in Hawkins because I want any of *this*.” Nancy gestured wildly at the room, the house, the whole messed-up Wheeler family dynamic around them. “*This life* is a freaking horror show, and you know it.”

Mom froze, her face paling. Nancy had the gut-curdling realization that her mother was on the verge of tears…and that she was the one who had brought her there.

“You have no idea what you’re talking about,” Mom said, her voice tight.

Nancy’s rage sputtered. *No*, she thought, feeling the wobble of uncertainty set in again. Maybe if she just kept going, she’d find solid land.

“I’ve had eighteen years to take it all in,” she said. “I think that makes me an expert.”

Her mother shut her eyes. One tear slipped down her cheek. Nancy had the overwhelming urge to reach out and wipe it away. But before she could follow through on that impulse, Mom’s eyelids were fluttering open again. And when she looked down at her daughter, her gaze was clear. Any brimming tears had been banished; her eyes were dry as a bone.

“You’re right,” Mom said, her voice as flat and neutral as an evening newscaster’s. “I can’t make you do anything you don’t want to do. And if staying here is what you think is best, then I won’t try to stop you.” She drew herself up, spine straightening into a rigid line. “But these *horror shows*? We build them ourselves. They might not look the same, but they are. And before you write me off completely, I’d like you to do me a favor.”

Nancy clenched her teeth and raised her chin, because if she didn't, she was afraid she'd start crying. She gave a curt nod. *Go ahead*.

Her mother's small, bitter smile didn't do anything to alleviate Nancy's building shame. "Remember that there's always a way out," she said. "If you want it bad enough. You just have to let yourself believe that it's true."

And with that, her mother turned and padded out of the bedroom.

Nancy said, "Mom—"

But the door closed, and Nancy was alone.

"Shit," Nancy told the air. She flopped back onto her bed, a marionette with cut strings.

Next to her ear, something rattled. A second later, something small and round rolled into the top of Nancy's head. She raised her chin, peering through tear-blurred eyes.

Her mother's pill bottle had fallen out of her pocket while they were talking. Nancy absently grabbed it, turning it over in her fingers. *Should I chase her down to give it back? Should I just leave it in the bathroom? Should I hide it? Should I—*

She stopped.

Nancy had looked at her fair share of pharmaceutical labels in the past few days, once the mystery of Joey's Rx list had been unraveled. She could decipher the handwritten scrawl of pharmacy phone numbers, the prescription numbers, the patients' names, the prescribers' names. But there was one part of the label that didn't need any decoding.

The logo of the pharmaceutical company.

PRIMROSE PHARMACEUTICALS was emblazoned in the top left corner of the label in a serious and sedate font. But it was the image below those words that grabbed Nancy's attention. A geometric flower, razor-straight lines suggesting the petals of a blooming rose.

Nancy had seen that logo before. And she knew exactly where.

Diving for the space beneath her bed, Nancy hauled out the conspiracy board. There, pinned to the upper corner, was the sketch of the corroded symbol she'd seen printed into the barrels beneath Hawkins Credit Union.

A construction nonprofit might have a hard time getting their hands on gallons upon gallons of toxic waste. But a pharmaceutical company? They must generate tons of the stuff each month. And what better way to dispose of it—than in a town where disaster had already struck once.

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Chapter Thirty

"Sean!"

The door to Sean's office already stood half open, so Nancy took that as an invitation to enter without knocking first. She found him at his desk, flipping through a small stack of papers. He looked up as she came in, and Nancy could see his tired eyes instantly register her disheveled state.

She hadn't slept much the night before. It was becoming a theme in her life. But this time, it hadn't been midnight adventures that had kept her from her bed—it had been her own thoughts. She'd spent the night staring up at her ceiling, mulling over Primrose Pharmaceuticals, sketching its logo into her notes, trying to recall anything and everything she'd ever heard about the company.

And if she'd plunged in to avoid thinking about *"You think I want to be like you?"*—well, who could blame her?

"Wheeler," Sean greeted her. "There you are."

Corporal Young was lurking somewhere in the bullpen outside. Nancy shut the door and lowered her voice. If Young wanted to be a part of this conversation, then she'd have to be polite and knock.

"I figured it out," Nancy said, not wasting any time on greetings. "What's making everyone sick. Who's behind it. I *know*."

"You look like hell, kid," Sean said.

People kept saying that to her. Nancy tried not to take offense. "I'm fine. Did you hear me? I figured it out. It's *Primrose Pharmaceuticals.* They're the ones who—"

"Wait—the drug company?"

“Yeah, the drug company. They’re using Hawkins as a toxic chemical dumping ground. I guess they thought we were already so messed up after the earthquake that nobody would notice a little extra sludge. I saw the barrels beneath Hawkins Credit Union before someone disappeared them, and it wasn’t Tyler Gorse who did it, even if he is getting accused of Joey and Georgia’s murders, which means that he’s working with someone who’s still out there, and—”

“Hang on, hang on.” Sean grabbed a disposable water bottle from a corner mini-fridge and pressed it into Nancy’s hands. She hadn’t realized that she was running out of breath until the shock of the cold bottle in her hands reset her nervous system. “Take a breath, okay?”

“I figured it out,” she insisted, before submitting to a sip of water.

“It sounds like it,” Sean said. “Or, I’m sure it will once I untangle what you just said. But while you figure out which way is up again, here—” He leaned over his desk, picked up the stack of papers he’d been looking through when Nancy had first come in, and handed them to her. She shoved her water bottle under her chin to hold on to it while she flipped through the pages.

They were newspaper articles—grainy and unclear and unmistakably received via fax, but definitely newspaper articles. The mastheads proclaimed them to be from papers all across the country: Florida, New Hampshire, California, Louisiana. The dates ranged from 1986 all the way back to the mid-seventies.

Respiratory Illness Sweeps Crystal Grove

Flu Outbreak Hospitalizes Twenty in Lionel, CA

Mystery Virus Runs Rampant

“They’re all towns where Hearth & Home came to save the day,” Sean said, pointing at the headlines. “Hurricanes, blizzards, wildfires—the natural disaster hits, then H&H follows. And then, a couple months after that…” He tapped the top article, which had a body count.

“They’ve been doing this all across the country,” Nancy said, almost to herself.

“And they’re doing it to Hawkins.”

“Shit,” Nancy said, flipping to the next article.

“Shit.” Sean blinked. “Wait—hold up there. Did you say Tyler Gorse?”

Nancy had to tear herself away from the sheaf of articles to look at Sean. “Oh—yeah. They took him into custody two days ago.”

“Well, he’s not there anymore.”

“What?”

“He’s dead.” Sean crossed his arms, leaning back against his desk. “Killed himself in his cell. Sometime last night.” Answering her incredulous look, he shrugged. “Callahan.”

“*Killed himself?*” Nancy shook her head, willing Sean’s words to make sense. “No way. He thought he was getting out of there.”

“Looks like he did.”

“I warned him.” Nancy wanted to pace, but the office was too small. She had to settle for shuffling the papers over and over one another to work out some of her nervous energy. “I told him to come clean. I *knew* his partner wasn’t going to just let him go.”

Sean’s brow creased. “Partner? What partner?”

“Whoever Tyler was working with. Whoever killed him.”

“Whoa, Wheeler, hey.” Sean placed placating hands on Nancy’s shoulders, forcing her to settle. “If you’re right and there’s somebody else still out there—they’re dangerous. And if you keep pressing on this, you stand a good chance at landing in their crosshairs.”

Crrreak. The bank door slammed shut on Nancy and two hundred gallons of poison.

Nancy grimaced. “I think I already am.”

Sean let out a slow breath. “Oh…kay.”

Nancy squared her shoulders. “We have to run the story, Sean,” she said. “Once it’s out there, then this guy’ll be showing himself to the world if he comes for me.”

The crease between Sean’s eyebrows deepened. “It’s not that simple. You’ve got a lot of good stuff here, but it’s not concrete. You need something more solid if you’re going to make this stick.”

Solid like the who-knew-how-much toxic waste stashed beneath houses all across Hawkins…houses that would never let a single bad word about H&H through the front door. Sean ducked down to make sure he caught her eye. “Remember what I said before?”

She felt like a kindergartner being prompted for an easy answer. “Don’t call your shot until you’re one hundred percent sure.”

“A *thousand* percent when you’re going up against super-powerful pharmaceutical companies.”

Nancy sagged. “I’m looking. I swear. I just—” she brandished the sheaf of articles. “I can’t let them keep getting away with this.”

“Some nonprofit.” Sean huffed out a laugh. “What was their motto? Saving Homes, Changing Towns?”

“Saving Towns, Changing Li—”

An image hit her, so fast she nearly choked on her tongue. *Georgia’s business card.* The one she’d pressed into Nancy’s hand as she lay dying on the floor of her office. The smear of her blood as she’d tapped that motto. Nancy hadn’t known what it meant at the time, but—

“You okay, kid?” Sean asked. He was studying her face, looking concerned. “Drink some more water.”

“I don’t need water,” Nancy said. “I need to go.”

“What’s the hurry?”

Nancy was already halfway out the door. “I know where to find our evidence.”

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Chapter Thirty-One

Boots, this time.

Rubble and dirt crunched under Nancy's rubberized, sturdy, and incredibly thick soles as she ducked under the shredded yellow CAUTION tape outside Dr. Larson's office building.

It took a heroic, teeth-gritting effort not to hunch her shoulders or dig her hands into her pockets as she made her way up the front path. Breaking and entering in broad daylight called for confidence rather than subterfuge. If Nancy looked like she belonged here, walking right through the front door of this cordoned-off Hearth & Home construction site, then *maybe* nobody would call the cops.

The plexiglass windows in the front door had been replaced with slabs of rough plywood, which did a great job of blocking the interior from the prying eyes of any passing pedestrians…but was less adept at stopping someone from covertly unlocking the door. All it took was a jab with Nancy's shoulder to dislodge the plywood from the side of the window frame. Then she was wriggling one arm in through the gap, feeling for the door latch, and twisting it open.

The door swung open easily and silently on newly replaced hinges. Nancy tried not to be impressed at the quality of Hearth & Home's work. She slipped inside, letting the door shut behind her.

There was no need to dig out her flashlight, for once in her life. The *upside* to doing this in the middle of the day was that shafts of light plunged through the building's murky darkness, highlighting every speck of asbestos dancing in the air and painting shadows over the linoleum tiles. But for some reason, the cheery sunlight just amped up the anxiety crawling over

Nancy's skin. She stood in the lobby for a long moment, ears straining for any distant movement, any sign that she wasn't—

Alone.

Nancy's fingers itched to reach for the walkie-talkie that Marquez had given her. She clenched them instead, fists jamming into her pockets. She was here. She was *making progress*. And she wasn't going to wait around for someone who'd just tell her to sit tight and wait for the bad guys to get away.

And what straw man "someone" is that? whispered a voice in the back of her mind. She marched decisively forward so that she wouldn't have to answer.

When Nancy stepped through the door of Dr. Larson's office, the first thing she noticed was that someone had decided to use it for furniture storage. Sheet-shrouded tables, chairs, and standing lamps cluttered the floor, and Nancy had to navigate through them carefully, wincing as her hip banged into a side table and sent a stack of out-of-date magazines sloughing to the ground.

The mural looked more or less the same as it had the last time she'd seen it—maybe it had acquired a few more layers of construction dust, but that was about it. Nancy had no problem picking out her own handprint as she approached it.

But baby Nancy's handprint wasn't why she was there.

Reaching into her pocket, Nancy dug out the stiff rectangle of card stock that Georgia had pressed into her hand as she'd lain bleeding out all over Nancy's shoes.

Holding it up into the light, Nancy squinted past the smears of blood to the words printed underneath. *Georgia Miller. Chief Executive Officer, Hearth & Home Inc.*

And then, under that—

Saving Towns. Changing Lives.

"Saving towns is about saving *the towns, you know?"*

The bottom of the mural had been covered by a threadbare waiting-room sofa. Nancy shoved it aside with a massive heave, coughing as clouds of

dust plumed directly into her lungs and eyes. She wiped her hands on her jeans, squinting at the messy decades of children's handprints, searching—

There. Georgia's yellow handprint. The one she'd pointed out during the interview. Nancy crouched in front of it, tracing the edges, feeling where it disappeared behind others. Then she dropped her questing fingers lower, finding the upper lip of the baseboard.

It gave beneath her touch.

Nancy's heart gave a hopeful double-thump. At first glance, the board looked like it was set completely flush against the wall. But as she leaned in closer she could see how the fallen construction dust had formed a snowdrift along the top of the baseboard.

Again, she pressed at the baseboard. Again, it shifted. But she was watching more closely this time, and she could see the way that the accumulated dust sifted away, filtering into an unseen crack between the baseboard and the wall behind it.

That was enough for Nancy. She dug her fingernails into the invisible crack. Then, trying to ignore the pain of her torn cuticles, she yanked at the baseboard with all her might—

And almost toppled backward, overbalancing into a sheet-shrouded chair as the board came away freely in her hands.

At least no one was around to see that, she thought once she'd struggled her way out of the chair. Taking a minute to get her limbs in order, Nancy shuffled onto her knees and lowered herself onto her forearms, peering down at the space that had been revealed once she and the baseboard had gone flying.

A chunk of drywall had been raggedly chiseled out of the wall, leaving a gap right where the plaster ought to have met with the floor. It was narrow—short enough that it wouldn't have been visible above the baseboard molding and barely more than eight or nine inches in length. If she hadn't been looking for something exactly like this, she would have written it off as a construction error. But because she was…

Please no cockroaches, Nancy thought. She slid her hand into the gap. And maybe her prayers had been answered, because the first thing her

searching fingers brushed up against was the unmistakable dry surface of a sheaf of paper. She hooked it with the tips of her fingers, drawing it out into the dusty sunlight.

Nancy's prize was an unlabeled filing folder. Flipping it open revealed a sheaf of papers. They were covered in readouts and data, diagrams and equations, and just looking at them was enough to make Nancy's eyes cross. She tried to force herself to do a cursory scan, but the second she came across the word *dichloromethane,* she could feel a headache start to pound in her temples.

But there was one phrase in the documents that she had absolutely no difficulty processing. *Primrose Pharmaceuticals.* It popped up on every page, peppered in the paragraphs of indecipherable chemical compounds and proudly emblazoned on the letterhead. It was incriminating. It was evidence. It was *everywhere*.

This was what she'd been needing for days now—what everyone from Sean to Jonathan to Agent Marquez had been pressing her for. *This* was what she needed to really land this story.

Adrenaline was making her hands shake. It took some fumbling to dig the walkie-talkie out of her bag. She shoved the TALK button down with a clumsy thumb. "Agent Marquez?"

There was nothing but silence on the other end. *Maybe he was away from his receiver?* Nancy tried again. "Agent Marquez. I found it." And then, feeling a little too similar to her brother and his friends, she asked, "Do you copy?"

Again, silence. There was a cold, awful suspicion growing in Nancy's stomach.

She wouldn't give it time to spread. She snapped the file folder shut and shoved it into her bag. "Agent Marquez?" she tried one last time, but her walkie-talkie remained stubbornly silent in response.

Moments later, she was stalking across the lobby and out of the office building, hopping back into her car. She sped across Hawkins in grim silence. The house where she'd found Marquez squatting was not very far, but she felt every second that passed like nails on a chalkboard, *scraping*.

It was quiet when she parked outside. As far as abandoned houses went, this one still looked innocent enough. But as Nancy tumbled out of her car onto the front walk, her eyes landed on one bone-chilling detail that she couldn't ignore.

The front door was open. Just a crack. But enough.

Dread coursed through her as she padded up the walkway. Her ears strained, listening for the slightest sound inside the house. *Even if Marquez was trying to lay low, surely he'd make some amount of noise…*

There was nothing. Nancy gingerly eased the door wider, letting the sunlight split apart the gloom inside.

Shit.

It wasn't so much that the house was empty; it was that the house had been *turned upside down*. Marquez's belongings were still there, but they had been scattered, strewn around the living room like they'd been tossed. His camp stove was in bent and broken pieces. His dirty mug was shattered. And the couch cushions that he'd fashioned into his makeshift bed had been ripped apart, their fluffy filling yanked out and discarded in snowy piles.

"Agent Marquez?"

Her whisper filled the room, the only sign of life. As Nancy took her first steps inside, the toe of her boot collided with something hard and plastic, kicking it into the shaft of sunlight.

A walkie-talkie. *Marquez's* walkie-talkie. The sight of it ripped the bottom out of Nancy's stomach.

Whatever—whoever—had taken out Joey Taft, Georgia Miller, and Tyler Gorse?

They'd gotten their hands on Marquez too.

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Chapter Thirty-Two

She needed to regroup. She had no one to regroup *with*. Nancy settled for retreating home. Her mother was nowhere to be seen as Nancy pushed tentatively through the front door. For the best. Probably.

She could hear the distant sounds of Mike messing around somewhere downstairs, but all noise came to her through a thick cloud of fog, one that buoyed her through the house. She was moving on autopilot, not in control of where her subconscious was taking her until the cloud melted and she blinked, realizing that she was in her room, sitting on her bed, staring at her telephone. And all of a sudden, she knew why.

She called Robin.

No one picked up at the Buckley house. Nancy counted this as another blessing. She didn't want to be treated to the cold click of Robin hanging up on her. Still, her shoulders slumped as Mrs. Buckley's cheery recorded voice took over. "Hi there. You've reached the Buckley residence. We can't come to the phone right now—"

Nancy hung up. Then, after a split second of consideration, she picked up and called again. Her knee jigged impatiently through the ringing, through the Buckley family answering-machine message, through the prompting chime—

"Robin, hey. It's Nancy." The words spilled out, tumbling over one another, pebbles in a river. She had to only hope that they made some kind of sense. "I know you probably don't want to hear from me, but"—*her parents could listen to this*—"I've been doing a lot of thinking about what we—what you said. And you're right, I should have talked to you first. I wasn't thinking about what you wanted." She took a deep breath. "You're

not the only one who's been remembering Higgins's graduation speech. I've been scared too. I've just been trying not to think about it, and…it hasn't been working out so well." How much space was left on the tape? She needed to wrap this up. "What I'm trying to say is—that story you were helping me with? For the paper? It's about to go to print. But in case something happens to…the story…before it does? I wanted you to be warned." She took a deep breath. "I'm sorry." She paused. "Okay. Um. Bye."

She hung up. Maybe Robin had been listening to her ramble the whole time. Maybe she'd been screening her calls.

Or maybe she was out of the house and wouldn't be back for hours. There was no way to know. To be on the safe side, Nancy stared down at the receiver in its cradle for a minute straight, willing it to ring.

Stop wasting time, she told herself as the second hand completed its lap around her wall clock. *You've got work to do.*

She made herself turn away from the phone, to dig out the folder she'd extracted from Dr. Larson's office, and to start flipping through the pages.

Figures. Numbers. Charts. They blurred together, just like they had before. This time, though, Nancy forced herself to focus, to drill down and try to make sense of what Georgia had given her life to pass along.

It was the confirmation of all her direst suspicions. Primrose Pharmaceuticals had been using Hearth & Home worksites to dispose of the chemical waste that would otherwise have cost them to get rid of. These barrels had been buried in the concrete slab foundations of homes and businesses all across the country—and when the barrels had begun to leak, the people in those homes and businesses had paid the price.

But as she leafed through page after page of these bleak reports, she found herself frowning at more than just what she was reading. There was a piece missing, or maybe a piece from a different puzzle, one that didn't quite fit into the picture she was putting together.

It's Hawkins.

The realization hit like a lightning bolt, electrifying Nancy from the top of her head to the soles of her feet. *Hawkins*. It wasn't like any other

disaster site. It wasn't Crystal Grove or Lionel or whatever had happened in Louisiana. It was a quarantine zone with a massive interdimensional rift running down the middle of it. A person wouldn't just be able to drive across the militarized border with a truck full of chemical waste.

Unless that person didn't have to worry about militarized borders. Unless…they were *part* of the militarized border.

Downstairs, someone knocked at the front door, but Nancy barely registered it. She scrambled for her bag, yanking out the faxed articles that Sean's friend had sent. She spread them out across her desk, layering them over Georgia's papers. It was easier to scan through the newspaper clippings than it had been the hard data—especially now that she knew what she was looking for.

Military. The National Guard had been present at every one of these disaster sites, patrolling, keeping order.

Nancy sat back in her chair. *Tyler's partner is in the military.* It felt like a floodlight had been turned on over her head. She could see clearly for the first time. But who—

"Nancy!"

Mike's shout echoed up the stairs. "What?!" she shouted back.

"Someone's here for you!"

Her head was still stuffed full of questions as she shuffled her papers back together, shoving them under her pillow in a pathetic stab at safekeeping. She trotted out onto the landing and down the stairs—

And froze.

Captain Rose was standing at the front door, smiling his friendly smile. Mike hovered in front of him, scowling his concern at Nancy.

"Miss Wheeler. I hear you're working on a very interesting story," Captain Rose said.

Mike's wide eyes darted between Nancy and Captain Rose. "Is everything okay?"

"Everything's fine," Captain Rose said, very much at ease. "I just need to talk to your sister for a second."

But Mike had been through too much to be stood down that easily. “Doesn’t she need, like, a parent present, in order to talk to you?”

Captain Rose looked up helpfully at Nancy. “Would that make you more comfortable?” he asked. “We can get your mom or your dad in here.”

He didn’t move much. There was just the slightest twitch to his shoulder. But it was enough to draw Nancy’s attention down to the Colt .45 harnessed to his chest.

He raised an eyebrow at her. *Well?*

“We’re fine, Mike,” Nancy said. Her mouth was dry. “I was just going to interview Captain Rose for *The Post*.” Mike frowned. Nancy frowned back, mimicking him. “I’m serious,” she said, walking down the last couple of steps. *Get out of here. Get out of here.* “Could you give me, like, two seconds? Jeez.”

When was the last time they’d bickered like that? A million years ago. Before the world had exploded and they’d both grown up. But that was enough to make Mike roll his eyes and turn back to the stairs. “Whatever,” he muttered and climbed past her, up to his room, taking the stairs two at a time. And then Nancy was alone with Captain Rose.

Rose. He’d been there every step of the way. Murdering Joey. Gunning down Georgia. Trapping Nancy in the vault, then moving the barrels while she went for help. He’d taken care of Tyler. He’d somehow gotten Agent Marquez off the board. And now he was here.

What had Nancy called Tyler? *A loose end.*

Nancy did not like being a loose end.

Unfortunately, she knew exactly how he’d come to be here. If Sean had been prepping to run her story, then the first step would have been to clear it with—

“Corporal Young,” she murmured, more to herself than to Rose.

“Chain of command,” Rose agreed, following her train of thought. “It works for a reason.”

Nancy stuck her chin out defiantly. “What do you want?” she demanded, though she was pretty sure she knew the answer.

“I want you to come with me,” said Rose, and sometimes Nancy hated being right. “I want us to go for a ride.”

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Chapter Thirty-Three

Rose's Humvee was parked right out front, its silhouette so giant and hulking that it looked beast-like in the light of the setting sun. Nancy lagged on her front stoop, looking at it warily as Captain Rose proceeded ahead of her.

"Don't waste my time, Miss Wheeler," he told her when he noticed that she was hanging back.

"Why not?" Nancy said. She was aiming for bravado, but the quaver in her voice betrayed her. "You're just going to kill me anyway."

To his credit, he didn't try to bullshit her. "Sure," he said. "But at least this way, I won't make sure your family joins you. Sound good?"

It did not sound good. But Nancy's throat had choked up with panic at Rose's words, so she wasn't able to tell him that. She took one numb step forward. Then another. And in a dissociated march, she loaded herself into Rose's vehicle.

She couldn't be positive, but just before Captain Rose slammed the passenger-side door, she thought she heard the phone ring inside her house.

Rose said nothing as he started the vehicle and pulled out onto the road. That was fine with Nancy. The last thing she wanted was to make conversation with her own executioner. They proceeded in contentious silence, Rose driving at a sedate five miles above the speed limit the entire way, hands at a conscientious ten-and-two.

If she'd known where they were going, she might have taken a stab at an escape plan. But the way things were, every turn sent her pulse skyrocketing. Every stop-sign pause plunged her heart into her stomach. *Is this it? Is this it? Is* this *where I die?*

She had to pull it together, or else that stupid panicky mantra was going to be right, and she really wasn't going to get out of here alive. *How had I managed back in the vault*? Oh yeah—Nancy did her best to conjure Principal Higgins's florid face, to remember the exact timbre of his voice as he'd listed off the names of the kids who'd died in Hawkins Hell.

It wasn't working. Something in her subconscious *knew* this was a ploy—it wasn't going to fall for the same trick twice. And as Rose slowed to a careful, tortuous stop at a red light, any calm that memory had bought her was shattered as her pulse shot skyward.

No Higgins. Okay. Okay. Well. If there wasn't going to be any cavalry coming from Nancy's own mind—her own memory—then maybe there was something *here*, in the present, that she could use.

She tore her eyes away from the passenger-side window and started studying the Humvee's interior. It was fairly bare-bones, like most military equipment she'd come across over the past few years. Heck, most of the stuff they were hawking at the War Zone was more complicated than this actual Army vehicle, but that shouldn't be surprising. Rose didn't need the bells and whistles to make him feel like the real deal. He wasn't playing pretend.

The upholstery under her was tactical polyester—maybe nylon. The windows were large, but even from inside, Nancy could tell the glass was thick. If she was going to bust her way through them, it would take more than a well-placed elbow—and that was assuming she didn't mind shredding her arms to ribbons. In the strobing lights from the streetlamps they passed, Nancy could see the dashboard buttons, basic and unadorned and not exactly anything she could use as a weapon.

The back seat was empty. And when Nancy covertly tested the handle on her door, she found it remained stubbornly locked.

"I'm smarter than that, young lady."

Rose was watching her, a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. He was still so damn *congenial*—it was *weird*. There was a part of Nancy that wanted to smile back at him, like there was a joke they were both in on. But since the joke was her impending murder, she somehow found it in

herself not to give in to conviviality. She wrapped her arms around her torso, shoving herself as far into the corner of her seat as she could. She turned her icy gaze to the road ahead, prepared to fall into stoic silence—

Hang on.

There was something blinking in the shadows on Rose's left—a little red light. As the stoplight turned green and Rose returned his full focus to driving, Nancy chanced another look, squinting through the darkness until she could make out—

A police radio.

It was bolted to the dashboard just beside the driver's door. Nancy could see the coil of cord that connected the transceiver to the radio, and yes, *yes*, there was the red light blinking again. That radio was live.

Chain of command. This was how Captain Rose accessed his own little link.

If you go for it—then what? she asked herself, trying not to cut herself on the bleak edges of that question. *You can't run from him. He'll still kill you. And then he'll kill your family.*

Nancy gritted her teeth. *He's going to kill me anyway. He could kill my family anyway. At least this way I'll have a chance to take him off the board.*

She was so consumed by this back-and-forth that she didn't notice that they'd parked until Rose shut off the engine. Startled, Nancy looked around, taking frantic stock of her surroundings.

They were on yet another of Hawkins's earthquake-ravaged streets. This one seemed less residential—the buildings looked more like businesses and offices than single-family homes. Nancy could pick out more than a few Hearth & Home signs along the block. How many Primrose Pharmaceuticals barrels were buried beneath her feet?

There was something familiar about this particular street, though, now that she really looked, beyond the low-level recognition that came from living in one town her entire life. She'd been here before. She'd been here *recently*.

It wasn’t until she saw the building they were parked outside of that she knew why. The sign above the door said, FARRIER FAMILY FUNERAL HOME.

Nancy could almost laugh.

“Sit tight now,” Rose said. It was impossible to make out his expression in the dark, but Nancy could hear the dangerous lilt in his voice more than well enough. She just dipped her chin, letting her hair fall over her face. He was apparently satisfied with this, because he unbuckled his seat belt and opened his door, swinging out of the Humvee.

You have five seconds until he makes it to your door, if *you’re lucky.* Nancy didn’t waste a single one of those seconds. As soon as Rose’s door shut behind him, she was moving, lunging across the space between the seats. “*Hey!*” she heard Rose shout outside, but she didn’t spare him a glance. Lightning-quick, she snatched the transceiver out of its cradle, shoving it to her mouth.

“*Help!*” she gasped out. “This is Nancy Wheeler at Farrier Funerals! Captain R—”

Nancy didn’t hear the door opening, but there was no ignoring the grip Rose got on her ankle. She was pulled back across the seats with such a mighty yank that she almost flew, bouncing between the seat backs and the dashboard as she went. She landed half in and half out of the vehicle, on her back, staring up into Rose’s face.

There was no congeniality left in him. Not anymore. His eyes were two furious coals burning deep in his face. He looked like he’d very much like to incinerate her.

He settled for slugging her in the face.

Nancy’s head whipped sideways with the blow. She couldn’t help the yelp that burst from her as shock and pain drove the breath from her body. Her vision exploded with sparks and stars.

“You’re going to wish you hadn’t done that, sweetheart,” Rose informed her.

And although Nancy didn’t want to acknowledge it…she thought he might be right.

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Chapter Thirty-Four

Captain Rose dragged Nancy into the mortuary beneath the Farrier Family Funeral Home. She just barely saved herself from sprawling down the tiled ramp by slamming her hand into the wall, but Rose made sure she never completely regained her balance. He grabbed her by the back of her collar and practically threw her across the room, planting her in a folding chair. She landed so hard that the chair rocked back on two legs, tipping her into the wall behind her.

Overhead, the lights sputtered and flickered in familiar dying spasms, sporadically illuminating a room that looked almost exactly as it had when Nancy and her friends had left it. There were the scattered embalming tools. There was the door to the makeup area. Presumably, if she turned around, she'd see the refrigeration room where she could have sworn she'd found their first sign of Vecna in months.

The one difference—and it was a notable one—was the hole that had been blasted in the far wall, opening a passage between this basement and the basement of the building next door. Between the flickering lights and the headache that was starting to throb in Nancy's temples, it was hard to get a good glimpse of what was on the other side—

One of the nearest lightbulbs surged and a blast of light drenched the area. It was only for a split second, but it was long enough for Nancy to make out the now-familiar blue barrels…

And the limp silhouette of a man in a black suit who was sprawled face down on the ground next to them.

Agent Marquez.

I guess that explains why he wasn't answering his walkie-talkie, Nancy thought numbly as she took in the pool of blood beneath him.

"I had a feeling you knew him." Captain Rose paced out from behind Nancy. "I'd been trying to find him these last few days. I guess I should thank you for that."

The breath punched out of her as she realized what Rose was saying. "You were following me?" She must have led him straight to Marquez.

Rose gave a little shrug. "You're not the only one with hunches, young lady. I had a feeling you might take me somewhere I wanted to go."

Everything was muffled as shocked numbness spread through her. She watched the world through a cotton veil. Now that she could see a cross-section of the basement wall through the giant hole, she could tell that the walls were a lot thinner than she'd have expected. But what had Jonathan said a million years ago, when they'd first gone through the funeral home?

These walls were thin even before they were rubble. If Mrs. Farrier heard voices in here, were they "disembodied"? Or were they just, you know—

Outside.

Nancy leaned her head back against the wall behind her. That tip she'd swiped from Margaret's desk at *The Hawkins Post* might not have been what she'd been hoping it was—but it hadn't been a dead end. It had *never* been a dead end. Tyler Gorse and Captain Rose had been hard at work under Hawkins this entire time—*disembodied voices,* just like Jeanine Farrier had reported—using Nancy's town as their chemical dump site.

There were more barrels here than there had been beneath Hawkins Credit Union. There were probably more here than there were beneath any other building in town. Despite the bleakness of the situation, Nancy's reporter instinct—the one that needed answers, no matter the cost—compelled her to open her mouth. "Is this where you've been storing these?" she asked, pointing at the barrels that surrounded Agent Marquez. "When you smuggled them into Hawkins? Before Tyler snuck them out to the construction sites?"

Even in the dark, she could see the appraising look in Rose's eye. "Might be," he said.

She eyed them. *I guess there are no leaks in these*, she thought, a little manic, *or else we'd be choking on our own lungs right now.*

"That was a stupid move with the radio," Rose said, scolding her like she was a naughty school kid. "We've got the cops chasing their tails twenty-four-seven these days. You really think any of them are actually sitting around and listening to their scanners?"

Nancy thought about the empty police station—Callahan's petulant paralyzation—the beaten-down scowl on Chief Powell's face. She didn't want to think that Rose was right…

"Why are you doing this?" she asked.

"You know the answer to that question, Miss Wheeler," Captain Rose said. "You're just trying to get me talking. Stave off the inevitable. Isn't that right?"

It was, but Nancy didn't have to give him the satisfaction of hearing it from her. And anyway, it wasn't just "the inevitable" she was desperate to avoid. Every flicker of the overhead lights bought her another split second to inspect the mortuary around her. Every fluorescent flash was an opportunity to search for some way to escape.

But as far as she could tell, there were only two ways in and out of the basement. The first was up the ramp that they'd used to enter—the ramp that she couldn't currently see, because Captain Rose and his .45 and the suppressor he was screwing onto it were in the way. And the second exit was the hole in the wall that led to a room full of toxic chemical waste (and if there was a way out of *there*, then it was a mystery to Nancy).

Flash. The flickering lights strobed across Agent Marquez's unmoving back. *Flash*. They danced along the congealing puddle of his blood. *Flash*.

She was going to die down here. Just like him. Just like Joey at the stream. Just like Georgia in her office. Just like all the kids in Higgins's commencement speech who'd never made it out of Hawkins.

Flash.

Something smarted across Nancy's forehead. She flinched, squeezing her eyes shut—

Her breath froze in her throat.

The stinging in her eyebrows had vanished as quickly as it had appeared. *A memory*. That's all it had been. A memory triggered by the lights as they spasmed overhead. A memory pointing her right in the direction of—

The fuse box.

Her gaze slid sideways, gliding along the wall until it found the rickety, rusting steel box—the one Jonathan had accidentally used to nearly fry Nancy's eyebrows off two weeks ago. The metal door hung crookedly from its hinges.

Looking at it was enough to give Nancy tetanus. She'd never seen anything so beautiful in her entire life.

"My parents won't stop looking for me," she said, inching forward in her chair.

"Okay," Rose said easily. "Well, if they find you, it'll be under a couple hundred tons of rubble. Cub reporter, poking around in the basement of a condemned building." He sucked his teeth, mock-disapproving. "Between you and me, I don't think this place is gonna last the night."

He was going to bring the building down on top of her. Bury her, along with Agent Marquez, and the barrels. By the time anyone excavated her—if they ever did—Rose would be long gone, as far from Hawkins as he could get.

Why did I ever think that dying in a funeral home would mean easy cleanup? she thought, the words shrouded in a haze of panic. "Then…" Nancy paused—it wasn't difficult to summon the teary quiver in her voice. "I know it's asking a lot, and you don't owe me anything…but would you do me a favor?"

Rose just frowned. "What kind of favor?"

"Would you…make it quick?" Nancy took a shaky breath, casting her gaze down to the floor. "One shot? I just…don't want to suffer." *Like Joey.*

Like Georgia. Even if she didn't say their names, she was pretty sure Captain Rose heard them loud and clear.

"I think I can manage that," he said.

Nancy watched as the tips of his combat boots stepped into her field of vision, close enough for him to press the end of his suppressor directly against her forehead.

"Thank you," Nancy whispered. She closed her eyes again—

And lunged up from her chair, slamming sideways into Rose's gun arm with every ounce of strength she had.

Rose's hand was crushed between Nancy's shoulder and the rough stone wall, his finger automatically spasming on the trigger. Nancy had just enough time to body-check her way past him before the sharp retort of gunfire—even suppressed as it was—could *completely* decimate her eardrums.

She cast one desperate glance behind her, just in time to see Rose, shaking out his red and bruising hand, grabbing his gun off the floor. Whatever he shouted at her, she couldn't hear it over the tinny ringing in her ears, but she'd have put good money on the word "bitch," among others. He wrenched himself around to level his gun at Nancy—

But she was already at the fuse box. The door flew aside easily—if the latch had ever been functional, Jonathan's tampering had taken care of that—revealing the spaghetti dinner of tangled wires inside.

Maybe all of Captain Rose's time contaminating construction sites had given him a little bit of practical knowledge, because he realized what Nancy was about to do right before she did it. "Don't—"

She did. Two hands in the fuse box, two fistfuls of wires, one harsh yank—

It wasn't so much that the lights went out. It was that they gave up the ghost. Nancy could *feel* the surge of their deaths—or maybe she'd given herself a mild electric shock. Either way, after months of sputtering, the power to the Farrier Family Funeral Home was finally cut, and the basement mortuary plummeted into darkness.

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Chapter Thirty-Five

"God damn it!"

Any trace of the carefully cultivated warmth and goodwill in Captain Rose's voice was long gone. His words whipped out through the dark, bouncing against the tiled floor and stone walls, rattling in Nancy's rapidly clearing ears.

She dropped to the floor, toeing off her shoes as silently as she could. It was only a few yards to the ramp, and only a little farther than that to the exit. If she could make it without being caught—

There was a muffled swear from the side of the room nearest to the ramp, followed by a clatter as Rose knocked over one of the trays of embalming equipment. Nancy could only listen helplessly as he made his way toward the exit, heading off her escape.

At least she could be sure that he didn't have a flashlight. If it hadn't made an appearance by now then it wasn't going to. She kept a careful distance from the sound of his thunking combat boots as they marched a deliberate path across the foot of the ramp, making her way forward by sliding softly on her hands and knees.

There was a strange sound filtering in from the world above them, a faint, distant wail, familiar enough for Nancy to *almost* recognize—

"All right, Miss Wheeler," Captain Rose called. "That was a very neat trick. But you're a smart girl—you know there's no way out of here."

He was right. Nancy knew it in her gut as she padded cautiously forward, feeling ahead of her to make sure she didn't stumble into anything unseen, like Rose had.

“Now, maybe I was a little too hasty before,” Rose went on. “Sometimes I have an itchy trigger finger. Blame it on too much caffeine. But I’ve gotten that out of my system for the moment. Let’s talk. Maybe there’s an agreement we can come to. I can pull some strings at Primrose. I’ve got connections.” There was some more shuffling as he patrolled across the ramp. “Doesn’t that sound good? A way out of Hawkins. Just come on out, Nancy, and we can talk it over. Nobody has to get hurt.”

If he wanted her to believe that, then he shouldn’t have opened with a gun pressed to her head. But she couldn’t keep slithering around on the floor forever. Sooner or later, Rose was going to find her.

That strange, distant sound was getting louder now. *Closer*. And as it did, Nancy’s heart leapt. *Could it be?*

Yes. There was no mistaking the sound of police sirens. They screamed toward the funeral home on the street above them, their wail echoing off the mortuary walls. There was no way to tell how many squad cars were headed this way, but it was more than one—and they were *close*. Nancy could have collapsed in relief. *Someone must have heard her on the radio.* Rose’s chain of command wasn’t as unbreakable as he thought. This nightmare was almost over. She just had to stay hidden for a few more minutes—

“That’s pretty lucky timing, Miss Wheeler.” There was a faint *click*—it took Nancy a moment to recognize it as the sound of a gun being cocked.

He doesn’t know where you are, Nancy told her spiking heart rate. *He can’t shoot you if he doesn’t know where you are.*

But when the gunshots rang out—*one, two, three*, *four, five* percussive blasts, halfway muffled by the suppressor—they weren’t aimed in her direction. With horror, Nancy realized that Rose’s target was the array of barrels in the room behind the wall. And the distant trickling sound confirmed that Rose’s bullets had found their mark.

“Pretty lucky timing,” Rose said again. He was on the move, striding quickly toward the ramp. He didn’t want to be in the mortuary any longer than he had to, not now. “But don’t waste your breath. I’m not making the same mistake twice. You might have called the cavalry, but I can make sure

they don’t stick around. There’s not gonna be any getting out of here this time.”

Damn it. He was right. If Rose got out there, he could send the police on their way with a word, all while Nancy suffocated on the mortuary floor. She could already feel the familiar burning in her lungs, an ugly memory of the pit beneath the bank vault. There were more barrels here, and a smaller space, and the chemical seep was poisoning the air way faster than it had at HCU.

Nancy didn’t need to summon the memory of Principal Higgins to banish her panic this time. There was no panic to banish—only cold anger.

This *asshole*. He had come into her town. Hurt and killed *her people*. And he just thought he was going to get to *leave*?

No. Nancy would not let that happen. She couldn’t.

Gritting her teeth, Nancy rose to a crouch. She’d been staring into the dark for so long that she could make out the edges of Captain Rose’s silhouette, black on black, as he closed in on the door at the top of the ramp.

She hit him out of the darkness like a battering ram, slamming him into the wall. She could hear the railing connect with his hip bone in a cartilaginous crunch that—if the *Shit!* he yelped was any indication—*hurt*.

There wasn’t any time to enjoy that, though—Nancy was too busy struggling to find her footing. Her charge had set both her and Rose off-balance, and as Captain Rose toppled backward down the ramp, he grabbed at the back of Nancy’s shirt, taking her down with him. She landed next to him on the tiled floor, taking most of her weight in her shoulder.

“You little *bitch*,” Rose snarled. He reached over to grab her by her hair, but she levered her legs up just in time, landing a kick to his chest that sent him stumbling back.

She could hear movement from upstairs. The police, the military—whoever had been summoned by Nancy’s desperate call—were at the door of the funeral home, making their way inside. With a sickening jolt, Nancy remembered the halfway hidden entrance to the mortuary. She and her friends had almost missed it the first time they’d come here, and if the cops

didn’t know to look for it, they might not find it at all. They might not find *her* at all.

“Hey!” she cried—or tried to cry. But the air was acid in her lungs. She could feel her breath like sandpaper, scraping against her windpipe. It made her voice thready and weak. She rolled over onto her stomach and tried to climb to her feet, but it was like the vault all over again. Her legs just wouldn’t cooperate. Sagging back down to her hands and knees, she forced herself to army crawl up the ramp.

“Have you checked over here?” called a voice from the other side of the door. *Chief Powell,* Nancy thought, on a wave of relief. She tried to call out for him again. She was closer now, maybe he would hear her. Even as weak as her voice was—

A hand grabbed her collar, flinging her back down to the floor. Captain Rose knelt over her, pressing a hand over her mouth and nose. “*Shh,*” he hissed, and maybe it was the poisonous air or the shock, but some dissociated part of Nancy’s brain thought it was a little funny that he was trying to give her orders even as he killed her. She scrabbled and scratched at his arm, kicking her legs, trying to find a point of leverage, to force him away from her.

But he was too strong, or she was too weak, or some combination of the two. His grip was iron on her face. She couldn’t shift it, couldn’t buy herself the barest millimeter of space to breathe in another gulp of toxic air.

Her eyes darted, desperate, searching for *anything* she might be able to use as a weapon. *Nothing, nothing, nothing—*

“Nothing!” called someone upstairs, echoing Nancy’s thoughts. “This place is empty!”

Wait—

Captain Rose was so fixed on keeping Nancy quiet, on smothering the life out of her, that he’d forgotten the reason he’d taken her down here in the first place. *To shoot her*. His gun rested, unlatched, in his shoulder holster. *Well within her reach*.

Nancy slid her grasping hand up his arm, hoping the gesture read like another attempt to stave off his strangulation. He barely paid it any mind. In

the darkness, Nancy could see the glimmer of his eyes as his gaze slid from her face to the top of the ramp and back again.

Which gave her more than enough of a chance to snake her fingers into his holster, grab his gun, point it at his side, and pull the trigger.

The *click* of an empty chamber resonated throughout the room almost as loudly as a gunshot would have. Above Nancy, Captain Rose froze, his grip on her face loosening as he realized what she'd just done—and that it hadn't worked.

The son of a bitch has blown through his entire clip, Nancy thought. He'd used all his remaining bullets shooting holes in the Primrose barrels.

Rose laughed. Nancy was distantly gratified that he sounded just as woozy and hazy as she was feeling. The fumes were getting to him too. "Nice try," he whispered, his voice scratchy.

Nancy shifted her grip to the gun's barrel. Rose's suppressor made a considerately long handle. She brought her arm back as far as it would go—

And slammed the butt of the gun into Captain Rose's temple.

He sagged over her like a sack of potatoes, his eyes slipping shut. She shoved him off, rolling over onto her hands and knees as racking coughs took her.

Go, was all she had the presence of mind to think. There was no way of knowing how long Captain Rose would be out—hours, minutes, seconds—and if he got his hands on her again, she wouldn't be making it out of this room. *Go. Go. Go.*

On each word, she shuffled forward—one hand, one knee, one hand, one knee. Slowly, she made her way up the ramp. Every gasp was knives inside her. She found herself holding her breath to avoid the pain, but that just made the fog in her head worse. *Go. Go. Go.*

She could hear, in a vague way, distant, erratic thumping. It took her dizzy brain a second to put it together. *Car doors slamming*. The people in the funeral home upstairs were *leaving*.

"No—" Nancy whimpered, but if her voice had been soft before, it was a whisper now. It didn't matter how much power she tried to pump into her lungs—they had nothing left to give her.

She reached the door. She pressed both hands against it and shoved.

It wouldn't move.

Through her blurring vision she could see the dead bolt, all the way near the top of the doorframe. Rose must have slid it shut after he'd brought Nancy down here, an extra precaution in case she tried to make a break for it.

Sweat broke out over her forehead as she tried to stand, reaching for the latch. Her fingers brushed against it once, but then her strength was gone and she crumpled to the floor again in a heap.

I tried, was all she could think as the ceiling spun above her. *I tried.*

Time passed. Maybe a second. Maybe longer. Nancy couldn't keep track. Her eyes slipped closed—

The door burst inward, the edge of it slamming into Nancy's side. The dead bolt went flying, torn from the doorframe. It clattered to the tiles somewhere in the dark depths of the mortuary.

Nancy squinted blearily up at the shape silhouetted in the open door. "Robin?"

Robin stared down at her. "Shit, Nance," she said. "I think you got your story."

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Chapter Thirty-Six

The chaos that erupted around Nancy when she and Robin emerged from the bowels of the funeral home was dizzying—or maybe that was just the aftereffects of the chemical fumes. Nancy endured an intensive exam by a pair of military paramedics, who clipped a cannula to her nose in order to pump her full of oxygen.

Once it had been determined that she wouldn't be dropping dead in the immediate future, Nancy turned her focus to ignoring the maelstrom of soldiers and policemen, all of whom wanted to know *every detail* about what had happened *immediately* and *at the same time*. She sank down onto the bumper of a squad car and let the chaos around her fade to a buzz of white noise.

"You heard me on the scanner," she said to Robin, who was sitting next to her, doing her best to glare down the wall of swirling uniforms.

"I hadn't been listening," Robin said. "But then you left that message on my answering machine, and I thought it would be a good idea. If someone leaves you a message like that, I think the odds are pretty tasty that that person is about to do something very extremely stupid."

"It wasn't like it was my choice."

Robin gave her an unimpressed look. "Nancy. Come on."

Nancy wrapped her arms around herself. Two soldiers were emerging from the funeral home, carrying a stretcher between them. A shrouded figure lay on it, silhouetted in the blinding military floodlights. *Agent Marquez.*

"He never told me his first name," Nancy said, hollow. "I—I never asked."

Beside her, Robin said nothing. But Nancy could feel an incremental increase in warmth as she leaned slightly closer, offering wordless support.

“He just wanted to help,” Nancy went on. She barely had an idea what her next word would be before it was tumbling from her mouth. “And then he came to Hawkins and—and now he’s dead. This town killed him. Georgia too. And Joey and—and Eddie, and Barb, and—and it could happen to us. Any one of us.” She forced a smile onto her face, because if she didn’t, she’d burst into tears. “Should I get a police scanner too?”

“Don’t get a police scanner.”

“I don’t know what to *do*, Robin!” Nancy whispered, intensely aware of the churn of police and military that surrounded them.

Robin shrugged, a sad glint in her eyes. “Me neither,” she said. “But I think—that’s why we have to ask for help. Anything’s better than trying to go it alone.”

Nancy sat in those words for a long moment, watching as the stretcher carrying Marquez was whisked away into the crowd. “Thank you,” she finally said. “For wanting to be there.”

Robin looked genuinely confused. “Lots of people want to be there for you, Nance.”

“Exactly. For *me*.” Nancy coughed again. It felt like the last of the fumes were leaving her lungs. Hopefully a hospital visit wouldn’t be in her near future. “Not for the case. Story. Mystery. Whatever. They want to be there because that’s what *I* want. Not because it’s what *they* want.”

Robin didn’t have to ask who “they” were. She just tapped Nancy’s shoulder with her own. “Sounds complicated.”

Nancy’s chin dipped on a wry nod. “I hate complicated,” she said.

It was all they had time for before the crowd of military around them pressed in again, sick of being ignored. Nancy quickly found herself overwhelmed by their questions, which came too fast to even allow space for her answers. She squinted into the strobing flash of red-blue-red police lights as the world around her started to twirl—

“All right, all right. Stand aside.”

Chief Powell forced his way through the crowd around Nancy, creating room to breathe where there had been none. “Miss Wheeler’s already been suffocated enough for one evening.”

“We’ll make sure she rests at HQ,” said one of the soldiers, a man with a lieutenant’s bar on his collar. “We’ve got a few more questions for her.”

Nancy tried not to wilt, but all she wanted in that moment was to take a shower and then crawl into bed for about a thousand years.

But it seemed like Chief Powell had had his fill of the military chain of command. He stepped in between Nancy and the eager lieutenant. “You can ask her as many questions as you want in the morning. You know where to find her. Hell, you guys have us locked down so tight, it’s not like she’s got anywhere to go.”

Maybe that was enough, or maybe there were some further negotiations, but Nancy was too busy watching as Captain Rose was loaded into the back of a windowless van to pay attention. He steadfastly refused to meet Nancy’s eye. Then the van doors slammed closed behind him and he was gone.

Nancy felt the last of the tension drain out of her shoulders.

The chief gave Nancy a ride home. He’d offered Robin a lift as well, but she’d turned him down with an apologetic grimace and a meandering explanation that she would never get into a police car of her own free will and that it was nothing personal and sorry.

“You done causing problems in my town?” Powell asked as he pulled up outside Nancy’s house.

There was absolutely no chance of that, but Nancy wasn’t about to admit that in such harsh words. Instead, she gave Chief Powell a tired smile. “Probably not.”

He hummed, considering. “Then be smart about it. Or next time, I’ll arrest you.”

Nancy wasn’t going to waste any more energy trying to deduce whether he was joking. She just nodded, then slid out of the car and trudged up the walkway to her front door.

It was dark when she slipped inside. Everyone was asleep. She breathed a sigh of relief. At least she'd be able to clean herself up before she had to answer any more questions. But despite the luring enticement of a shower, she paused at the foot of the stairs.

The telephone was in its spot in the kitchen. Nancy glanced at the wall clock. *Almost five* A.M. Too early for anyone to be at the office…but they probably used an answering service.

Feeling the weariness in every line of her body, Nancy picked up the receiver and dialed a number in Boston.

She woke up late the next morning, almost at noon. It took every ounce of willpower she had to haul herself out of bed and to take stock of her appearance in the mirror.

Not great. Her late-night shower had worked miracles on her aches and pains, as well as the lingering scent of formaldehyde, but nothing but time was going to do anything for the bruise swelling under her left eye. She prodded at it, wincing and wondering whether it was worth coming up with a cover story.

But she had enough lies in her life. Grimly, Nancy shrugged into her robe and went downstairs to face the music.

Her mother was washing dishes, elbow-deep in sudsy water, when Nancy walked into the kitchen. Nancy could just see the edges of her purple rubber gloves poking out from the surface of the water. She watched her mother for a second, taking in her busy, industrious movements as she worked her way through a mountain of breakfast dishes.

"Hey, Mom," Nancy offered into the quiet.

There was no response, not even the smallest twitch of her mother's shoulders. Nancy hadn't really been expecting one. Trying to brush this off, she went to the fridge, taking out the orange juice and pouring herself a tall glass. But as she replaced the jug and went to close the refrigerator—

"Nancy?"

It was the first time that Mom had spoken to her since their fight. Nancy froze, her orange juice halfway to her mouth. "Y—" She choked on her reply before coughing and trying again. "Yes?"

“When you’re finished with breakfast, get your brother to help you clear space in the basement.”

“Uh.” Nancy wasn’t sure she wasn’t imagining this interaction. Her mother still hadn’t turned around. “Okay. Is—How big a space?”

“Big enough for the Byers boys.”

Now Nancy *really* wasn’t sure this was real. “Really?”

“I spoke to Joyce.” There was a *squeak* as Mom shut off the faucet. She stripped off her rubber gloves and turned to face her daughter. “About their living situa—Oh my goodness!” Her jaw went slack as she took in the state of Nancy’s eye.

“It’s fine, I’m fine. I promise.”

“Stay there,” her mother ordered, bustling to the freezer and pulling out a pack of frozen peas. Then she wrapped them in a dish towel and pressed them into Nancy’s hand. “Eye,” she instructed.

Nancy complied, pressing the peas to her face. “Are you going to ask me how it happened?”

Mom pursed her lips, displeased. “Chief Powell came by this morning,” she said. “He told me about some of the…*things* that you’d gotten wrapped up in. With Hearth & Home. And Georgia.”

An explanation was on the tip of Nancy’s tongue—the whole story, starting with Joey’s death, winding through the barrels under HCU’s vault, and ending with Farrier Funeral Home. Instead, the only thing that came out was, “I’m not going to Emerson in the fall.”

Mom nodded slowly. “Okay.”

“Are you mad at me?”

Her mother’s face softened. “No. Yes. I don’t know,” she said. “I’m mad you were in danger. I’m happy you’re okay. I’m—” She took a deep breath. “I…owe you an apology.”

“No.” Nancy tried to lower the bag of peas but stopped when her mother *tsk*-ed her. “Mom, I owe *you* an apology. I shouldn’t have said all those things to you. I wasn’t thinking. I was mad and I was—I was freaked out. But that’s not an excuse. You’re not a nightmare, okay? I’ve got plenty of nightmares worse than this—”

“I hope so,” Mom muttered.

“—and I shouldn’t have ever said that you were. I’m really…” Nancy took a bracing, shuddering breath. “I’m really sorry.”

A long beat stretched as Nancy’s apology hung in the air. She felt every passing millisecond as they piled up around her feet, higher and higher until —

“Well,” was how Mom finally broke the silence. “I guess you’re going first.”

Unless Nancy’s eyes were playing tricks on her, there was a small smile ticking at the corner of her mother’s mouth. “I guess—yeah,” Nancy said.

“I’m not going to argue with any of what you said, Nancy,” Mom said. “I appreciate your apology. And I accept it.” She took a deep breath of her own, a mirror of Nancy’s. “I—I was hard on you. And Jonathan. And your relationship. And when we—when we talked—”

“Talked?”

The look Mom shot toward Nancy was probably supposed to be warning, but the amused spark in her eyes declawed it. “When we *fought*. All those things you were saying, they didn’t sound like you. To be honest, it scared me.”

Nancy ducked her head.

“I know you’re not me,” her mother said. “And I need *you* to know—that I’m not ‘afraid’ of you *turning into* me.” Her eyes narrowed. The look she pinned Nancy with was searching. Nancy could feel it down to her bones. “Do you understand why?”

“I guess—no.” Nancy let out a long breath. “I don’t.”

Mom paced forward, placing her hands on her daughter’s shoulders. “Because I don’t hate who I am,” she said. “This life—there are things that I would change. Things I would do differently. *God* knows. But”—her nails dug into Nancy’s shoulders as she gave Nancy a little shake—“there are so many things I wouldn’t have right now if I’d made different choices. Holly. Mike. And you.” A cool hand cupped Nancy’s cheek, stroking her skin. She realized that her mother was wiping away a tear. Nancy hadn’t even known she was crying.

“What I’m afraid of,” Mom went on, “isn’t you turning into *me*, Nance. It’s you turning into *anyone*. Anyone *else.* You’ve always been such a strong girl—a strong woman. You’ve always known exactly what you want. Where you’re headed. And anyone who gets in your way can—can go to hell.”

That startled a teary laugh out of Nancy. “Mom!”

“They can *go to hell*,” Mom said, louder this time. And if she wasn’t going to worry whether Holly was within earshot, then Nancy wasn’t going to either. “So when you told me about Emerson, I worried that you were letting yourself be changed. Just like I was afraid of.”

“And you thought that Jonathan was the reason?”

Mom shrugged, a little helpless. “I stayed for a boy.”

“I’m not.” Nancy grabbed her mother’s hand before it could drop from her cheek. “I’ve been afraid too, Mom. For…a long time. Months. Maybe years. I’ve been scared that if I stayed here for, like, even one *second* past graduation, I’d wake up the next morning trapped behind a white picket fence. But I’ve realized—or maybe I’m still realizing—that staying here for now doesn’t mean staying here forever. Not if it’s for the right reasons. And I’m not staying for a boy. I still know what I want. I’m getting out of Hawkins. It just might not happen…exactly when I thought it was going to happen.”

“Right reasons,” Mom echoed. The look that she leveled at her daughter was sharp and insightful, but for once, Nancy resisted the urge to glance away. “Are these the kind of reasons that have you and Chief Powell practically on a first-name basis with each other?”

“Kind of.”

“Then—okay.” She wrapped Nancy in a hug, squeezing tight.

Nancy did the same, burying her face in her mom’s shoulder. “You’re sure about Jonathan? Staying here?”

“I’m sure.” Her mother pulled back, giving Nancy a watery smile. “It’ll be like you’re living in the dorms. Co-ed. *Separate floors.”*

“Separate floors. Got it.”

“Just promise me,” Mom said, “the second those reasons are all wrapped up? You’ll get out of here. Military quarantine be damned. Remember what I said. There’s always a way out.”

Nancy smiled. “You won’t even see me leave.”

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Chapter Thirty-Seven

The next few days were a blur of gray walls and grim-faced men in military fatigues. Nancy spent more hours than she could count running through her investigation of Hearth & Home, of Primrose Pharmaceuticals, and of Captain Rose. She presented Georgia's research to everyone she spoke with—*copies* of it. She'd had Robin hide the originals, just in case someone tried to disappear Nancy again.

When she wasn't being summoned into bleak interrogation rooms for questioning, she spent the little free time she had poring over her story for *The Hawkins Post*. Sean made himself extremely available to help; the guilt from being partially responsible for Nancy's near-death experience turned him into an eager assistant. It was his connections and his digging that turned up the link between Captain Rose and Primrose Pharmaceuticals, and Nancy had never felt like more of a dolt than she did once she learned what it was.

"It's the *Rose* in *Primrose*," Sean said, tossing a newspaper onto Nancy's desk. "Gerald Primm and Timothy Rose started the company together back in 1923. Their descendants still run it today."

Nancy studied the article that Sean had pulled. In it, a boardroom full of people in sharp suits were congratulating one another about the release of a new pain relief medication. The caption specifically mentioned the company's current CEOs: *Abigail Rose and Daniel Primm.*

Abigail Rose looked just old enough to be Captain Rose's mother.

Nancy leaned back in her chair. "Captain Rose was just…working for the family business?"

"Looks like it."

There was no way to confirm, one way or another. The last glimpse that Nancy'd had of Rose was when he was carted away from the funeral home. He could be anywhere by now—the soldiers interviewing Nancy were not interested in parting with that piece of information.

But at least that meant Rose wasn't around to censor her story anymore. "We'll put it in the article," she told Sean. "I just need to find a spot."

Even before the piece ran, Hawkins PD was hard at work relocating people from homes that had been renovated by H&H. But beyond opening up more bare-bones military housing, the Army wasn't particularly invested in helping out twice-displaced Hawkins citizens. Even with the news of poor Agent Marquez's murder, the EPA had been barred from Hawkins by the quarantine, so there was no access to the extensive environmental testing required to figure out which buildings were inhabitable. Everyone who'd had their home fixed up by Hearth & Home needed to move. It was like the town was playing a giant game of musical chairs, with entire families shuffling into empty houses or moving in with their neighbors.

It was tragedy and it was chaos. But some tiny part of it made Nancy's heart warm, just a little bit. It was good to know that, at the end of the day, the people of this town would take care of one another.

Hawkins will get through this, Georgia Miller had said at graduation. Nancy wasn't ready to buy into that completely, not yet. But it didn't feel impossible, and that would have to be enough.

Late one afternoon, in the midst of all this madness, Nancy and Robin drove to the Squawk. Jonathan's car was already parked outside when Robin and Nancy pulled up in the station wagon. Nancy did her best to avoid making eye contact with it—as much as a human could avoid making eye contact with a car—as she turned off her engine.

"No Steve, huh?" Robin asked, squinting against the setting sun for any sign of Steve's BMW.

Nancy opened her door and slid out of the driver's seat. "I don't hear brawling, so probably not."

"So you *do* admit it!" Robin crowed, hopping out as well. "I seriously thought doomsday would come and you'd *still* be denying the fact that

those two idiots are *idiots* about you."

"That was redundant."

Robin rolled her eyes, practically *skipping* as she made her way back to the trunk. "Save the red pen for the paper, Miss Front Page News. This is a momentous occasion, and I *will* be celebrating accordingly."

"Nancy?"

Jonathan had appeared in the Squawk's front door. He was wearing his trusty rubber cleaning gloves, and there was a bucket of soapy water dangling from one hand. "Oh," he said when he saw Robin waving at him over the top of the car. "Hey."

"We've gotta work on our welcome committee," Robin commented to Nancy.

"What are you guys doing here?" Jonathan asked.

Nancy trotted around to join Robin at the back of the station wagon. The trunk door hadn't been closed all the way—actually, it had barely been closed at all. This was because of the love seat that had been jammed inside, the arm of which was jutting out of the car. Bungee cords had been strung from the propped-open door, around the loveseat, and then fastened to the bumper below. It was a tenuous setup at best, and Nancy had sweated through every single pothole and speed bump on the drive there.

"We're setting up the basement," she told Jonathan, starting to wrestle with one of the cords. "Using it as, like—actually, you tell him, Robin. It was your idea."

"Well, we need a spot, right?" Robin said. She was practically bouncing on the balls of her feet, excitement bubbling out of her as she rattled through her thinking. "For our Vecna-hunting base of operations. Somewhere we can actually get together and *plan.* 'Cause it's really sucked these last couple months, trying to figure things out on our own. And it turns out that the Squawk basement is *perfect,* war-room-wise." She grinned. "We can even put together a conspiracy board."

Jonathan had set down his soap bucket and meandered over to help Nancy untangle the web of rubberized cables. "That sounds…kind of long-term," he commented. Nancy could see out of the corner of her eye that he

was trying to make about as much eye contact with her as she'd tried to make with his car.

"Yeah." The last bungee cord came away in Nancy's hand. She tossed it on the growing pile in the grass. When she turned back to the station wagon, she found Jonathan watching her, serious and probing.

"Nance," he said. "I—"

Robin cleared her throat. "Um. Guys?" She gave them both a sheepish little smile as they looked over at her. "I appreciate that there's a conversation the two of you need to have, but it's feeling like maybe it falls more on the 'privacy, please' end of the spectrum. So before you get all deep-dive-y into your emotions, do you think we could get this sofa inside? That way I'll have a comfy place to start organizing Jimmy Fasthands's terrible records while the two of you talk about—whatever it is you're gonna talk about?"

Nancy cocked a questioning eyebrow at Jonathan. He shrugged and grabbed the arm of the love seat. "I'll take this end?"

The three of them eventually were able to wrestle the sofa out of the station wagon, through the Squawk's front doors, and down the treacherous staircase into the basement. It looked a little ridiculous, sitting solo in the middle of the empty floor, but Robin didn't seem put off by that at all. She grabbed the nearest crate of records, dragging it over to the lonely love seat, before shooing Nancy and Jonathan back out of the basement so she could be left in peace.

They went to the roof. The sun was about to set, and it was always easier to have hard conversations when there was something to watch besides the other person's face.

"So," Jonathan said, once the two of them had settled near the edge. "War room?"

You could really see for miles from up here. Nancy leaned against the little safety wall that ran the perimeter of the roof, crossing her arms on top of it. "I prefer mission control."

Jonathan huffed a soft laugh. "Sure."

She dug her chin into her arms, hard enough to ache. “I just thought—it was time to stop living at the end of the book. And this seemed like a pretty good place to start.”

Next to her, she could sense Jonathan go very still as he recognized her words. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

Nancy shrugged, not lifting her head. “I don’t know. If you hadn’t…I’d probably still be trapped in that mortuary right now.”

His mouth twisted, like she’d landed an unintentional punch. Jonathan hadn’t said as much, but Nancy suspected he had been berating himself for not being the person who’d come to her rescue when she needed it. “Pretty sure it was Robin who got you out of there,” he said, confirming her suspicions. “Not me.”

Nancy’s first instinct was to console him—or rather, to console his ego. She pushed through it, though. “It was Robin, absolutely. But what you told me…helped.” She sighed, feeling a bit of tension seep out of her shoulders. “I wasn’t—I wasn’t here. I wasn’t *now*. And it turns out that means that even if your body’s in the same room as your friends, you’re not actually there to hear what they have to say. Does that make sense?”

“I…think so.”

“Good, because I think I’m confusing myself.”

“Nancy, listen—” Jonathan tugged at his hair, looking for the right words. “I like that you’re intense. Okay? I like that you’re always full tilt. It’s the reason I fell in love with you in the first place.”

“The only reason?” she asked, lightly teasing.

He brushed a tentative finger over her arm before resting his hand, palm-up, on the wall in front of her. “One of them. There’s also…”

She turned her own hand palm-up. Their matching scars stood out starkly in the dying sunlight. “Yeah.”

It felt like it should be a momentous declaration. Especially here, on top of this building at sunset, with the spike of the radio tower looming above them and the whole Midwest spread out below. *It* felt *like it should be a big thing because it* was *a big thing*, she told herself, and she tried not to feel like she was going at her own emotions with an editor’s red pen. Those

scars—the *shared trauma* behind them—were the mascots of their relationship. The foundation.

"*The foundation's really…the foundation,*" drawled Tyler Gorse from some corner of Nancy's memory. And Nancy had learned a lot about foundations in the past couple of weeks. *If it's fucked, then the whole building is fucked.*

She studied Jonathan's face, taking in every shadow, every highlight, every line. *Did you ever really apply to Emerson?* The question was on the tip of her tongue, begging to be released. *Were we ever going to leave this town together? Was it all a lie?*

But who were those questions really for? Someone living at the end of the book. Someone who wasn't staying in Hawkins until the world ended. All that mattered was what was important *now,* and their foundation would hold for a little while longer. No need to call for total demolition. The future could wait.

She took his hand.

"I'm sorry about your house," Nancy said. "It really was nice."

"Yeah, well." Jonathan laced his fingers through hers. "I guess a picture window isn't worth my entire family getting slowly gassed to death."

"I can cosign that."

"Government housing it is." One side of his mouth twisted downward. Nancy wasn't sure he was even aware that he was doing it. "It's cool. I love washing my hair in a bucket."

She turned to face him, forcing him to mirror her. "Hey," she said. "I talked to my mom."

He blinked at her non sequitur, looking more than a little apprehensive. "About…"

"About the fact that she was being a jerk to you."

He ducked his head on a laugh. "Oh yeah. Right. Of course."

"And she actually had an interesting idea. She talked to your mom about it, but I wanted to be the one to ask you. Just in case…it was weird, or awkward, or—"

"Spit it out, Wheeler," he said, nudging her shoulder.

She squeezed his hand. “Sleepover at my house.”

His eyebrows shot upward. “Tonight? *That’s* your mom’s idea?”

“Not just you,” she said. “Your whole family. Come stay with us.”

There was a long pause. “Are you serious?”

“Completely.”

“That’s—we’d be putting your family out—”

“For as long as you need.”

He still looked kind of shell-shocked. “I mean, it seems like every open house in Hawkins is either rubble or potentially full of toxic waste, so that could be a *while*—”

“Then it’s a while.”

“Hey. Nancy.” He leaned forward, eyes intent. “This is a huge ask. Before I say anything, I have to ask…Are *we* okay?”

“*The foundation’s really…the foundation*.”

“We’re taking care of each other,” Nancy said. “That’s what we need. Right now.”

Another quiet pause stretched. Then Nancy laid her head on his shoulder. Together, she and Jonathan watched the last of the setting sun disappear behind the horizon.

“We’re gonna find Vecna,” Jonathan whispered into the growing summer night. “You know he can’t hide forever.”

Nancy smiled. “Shh,” she whispered back. “I think I see some fireflies.”

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Acknowledgments

Thank you forever to…

The awesome folks at Penguin Random House, and especially to Erum Khan and Gabriella Muñoz, for being both my coaches and my cheerleaders.

My indomitable agent, John Cusick, and the rest of the team at Folio Lit.

The wonderful people at Netflix and Upside Down Pictures, for giving me a chance to tell this story.

Matt and Ross, for bringing this show to the world and for letting me be a part of it.

Natalia Dyer, for Nancy’s grounded fire. And Maya Hawke, for Robin’s quirky loyalty.

My family—Mom, Dad, Willa, and Nick—because I’d never have come this far without you. And now, thank you to C, whose fierce determination puts even Nancy’s to shame.

Last but not least, thank you to the Nancys of the world, who fight for the truth, even when the world is telling them to sit down and shut up. Turns out, you don’t need telekinesis to be a superhero.

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CAITLIN SCHNEIDERHAN is a TV writer and novelist, who hatched from a cocoon of Terry Pratchett novels when she was thirteen years old. Her love of fun, genre-focused storytelling runs deep. Hailing from Silver Spring, Maryland, Schneiderhan now resides in Los Angeles. She still has a full shelf of Terry Pratchett paperbacks.

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